



Forever

EVER

SLOANE KENNEDY

FOUR EVER

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TRIGGER WARNING

Listed below are the trigger warnings for this book. Reading them may cause spoilers:

This book contains references to sexual assault and child abuse.

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PART I

Killian & Zak

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CHAPTER ONE

KILLIAN

“**W**hat did you do?” I called the moment I walked through the front door. I was greeted with a cacophony of barks, meows, and a few high-pitched shrieks. Claws scraped along the cheap laminate floor and I could practically see feathers flying in the other room as Skittles and Blueberry likely simultaneously took to the air to try and get to me first.

Blueberry won.

But just by a feather.

I put out my arm to give the gray parrot a place to land. Just as she settled effortlessly on my arm and got her wings tucked against her body, Skittles slammed into her. Blueberry’s claws dug into my arm as I reached my hand out to catch Skittles before she fell. The colorful macaw was small for her age, so that made the task of steadying her and keeping Blueberry upright at the same time a little easier. While Blueberry was as nimble-footed as they came, Skittles wasn’t so lucky. The brightly colored parrot had suffered significant neurological damage at the hands of her previous owner and while it was a miracle she could even fly, if she didn’t have Blueberry around to use as a guide, her ability to hit her target was fifty-fifty at best... even a target as big as myself.

I immediately felt more at ease as the birds began moving up my arm so they could perch on my shoulder at the exact same time that all five of the dogs and three of the four cats rushed into the room.

“Okay, okay,” I murmured as I greeted each four-legged family member in turn. The knot of pain that had been building in my chest as I’d gotten closer to the house eased a bit as one animal after another greeted me in

their unique way. Bentley, the one dog I'd come into the relationship with seven years earlier, lay dutifully at my feet as the other animals got their attention. But like clockwork, the little menagerie parted like the Red Sea at the subtle click-clack sound coming down the short hallway from the kitchen to the front door. More of the tightness in my chest eased as the medium-sized black and white bird carefully made his way along the slippery floor toward me. We'd long ago put a runner down on this part of the floor just to make it a little easier for Waldo, but the stubborn toucan always made it a point to walk around the narrow strip of carpet. It seemed to be his way of reminding us that he might have had a shit-ton of bad things happen to him and he didn't necessarily look like his beautiful brothers and sisters flying free in the rainforests of South America, but he was still here. And with his unique brand of determination to survive whatever was thrown at him, he'd likely outlive us all.

I waited until Waldo was within a few feet of me before I carefully bent down. Skittles and Blueberry balanced themselves on my shoulder and flapped around a bit but stayed where they were.

"Hey, old man," I said to Waldo as I held out my hand to him. He ignored the cats and dogs that were circled around me as he slowly stepped onto my hand. Like Skittles, his balance wasn't great, but I knew better than to try to assist him like I had the macaw. It took a good minute for the battered bird to make it to my forearm. He used his mutilated beak to balance himself as he stepped, and when I slowly lifted my arm and stood, he spread his crippled wings to try and balance himself. I tucked my arm close to my chest so he'd have my body to use as additional support if he needed it.

Which he did.

"You been keeping an eye on your daddy for me?" I asked Waldo just before dropping a little kiss to the top of his head. As crusty as the bird pretended to be, for some reason he'd gotten particularly attached to me, of all people. So much so that I was the only one who was able to actually touch him, despite the fact that Zak was the one who'd played a part in his rescue more than a year ago. It was the reason Waldo now lived with us rather than the rescue group that'd coordinated getting the bird away from his abuser.

My eyes fell to the small black screws that stuck out like a sore thumb against the bright orange of the bird's long upper beak. Part of the beak was

the gorgeous, natural orange that the bird had been born with. The rest was a close match but didn't have the subtle hues of color that Waldo's remaining natural beak did. I'd done my best to match the primary shade of orange, but there was only so much a 3-D printer could do. I'd managed to give Waldo a beak that made it possible for him to eat more of the foods that were a part of the bird's natural diet, but it still broke my heart every time I saw those damn screws. I could feel my anger and frustration building as I thought about the nameless, faceless human who'd beaten the poor bird with a stick so badly that his upper beak had been ripped in two.

"Did you say something?" I heard Zak call, and I automatically pulled in several breaths to force myself to calm down. By the time my man rounded the same corner the animals had, I had a smile pasted on my face. I saw Zak falter a bit and I knew why.

He knew the smile was shit.

But instead of calling me on it, his own lips pulled into a not-really-there grin as he leaned against the doorframe. His gaze shifted to the animals who were all lying on the floor around me or sitting on the nearby couch.

"Traitors," he said to the animals. A couple of them actually looked chagrined but only Dash, a black and white cat with a fluffy tail, went to Zak and began rubbing up against his legs. "Well, at least someone loves me," Zak grouched as he leaned down to pick the cat up.

It was on the tip of my tongue to remind Zak that no one loved him more than I did, but I kept silent. They were words I wouldn't have hesitated to speak eighteen months ago.

But a lot had changed since then.

Sometimes I wondered if maybe too much had changed.

Maybe *I'd* changed things too much.

My heart pounded frantically in my chest as I watched Zak nervously pet Dash. The need to walk up to him and take the cat from his arms so I could claim Zak's touch for myself was strong, but I managed to stay where I was. But I couldn't stop my eyes from roaming over Zak's body.

He was actually a hair taller than me, but not as heavily built. We were often mistaken for brothers since we were both in our early thirties, had dirty blond hair, some scruff on our faces, and various piercings. But whereas my tattoos went all the way up and down my arms and part of my chest and back, Zak only had a few on his upper arms. And while my eyes

were a boring shade of brown, Zak's were a startling, crisp gray that had flecks of gold and green in them. His eyes were windows to his soul, even when he didn't want them to be.

Like now.

There'd been a time earlier in our relationship that those eyes had only been filled with lightness, but that'd changed.

I'd changed that for him.

I tried to ignore the tension that settled in the air around us as I said, "You're making your famous beef stew. I could smell it from outside."

Zak finally lifted his eyes to meet mine. Something flashed through them... something that reminded me of the old Zak... the Zak I'd fallen in love with from the moment I'd first laid eyes on him in a crowded bar on Super Bowl Sunday. We'd both gone to the bar to hang out with like-minded fans, but by the time the nail-biting last quarter had been underway, I'd already had Zak pressed up against the wall of a bathroom stall. If the crowd hadn't been as loud and celebratory as they'd been, they surely would have heard every moan and cry of pleasure as I'd shoved hard and deep into Zak's perfect body. My knees had still been wobbly from my mind-numbing orgasm when I'd taken Zak's hand and led him from the bar. We'd ended up at my place and hadn't even learned who'd won the game until we'd stumbled out of bed long enough for a shower and some sandwiches the next afternoon.

"So I repeat, what did you do?" I asked as I tried to ignore the pain in my belly that threatened to send me to my knees. "That stew takes hours to prepare, as you've reminded me many, many times," I added as I looked around the room. "I don't see anyone new."

Zak had a habit of bringing home animals from the small rescue group he volunteered for – the ones that were most in need of a little extra TLC. He always called them fosters, but only on the rarest of occasions did they leave our house after that.

They had a way of becoming family from the moment they walked or were carried over the threshold.

In the past, Zak and I had had a lot of fun pretending to let him "convince me" to accept another four-legged or two-winged creature into our lives, but we'd both known it had been just another excuse to touch one another, to be with each other. Zak had always known I'd give him anything and everything to make him happy... I'd told him as much the first time I'd

admitted that I was so deeply in love with him that it scared the ever-loving shit out of me. But things had changed there too.

I could feel the guilt starting to layer in with the pain, and the urge to go find a drink was strong. I forced myself to take in some deep breaths as I turned away from Zak so he wouldn't see my shaking fingers. I pretended I was just using the time to get Blueberry, Skittles, and Waldo settled on the perch we kept near the door. Skittles and Blueberry got the bars at the top, since both could fly down to the ground or back to their perches in the kitchen if they wanted to. But Waldo's perch was on the bottom so he could just jump off. In addition to his beak, he'd lost the ability to fly when the fucker who'd maimed him had broken his wings too.

I forced myself to go to Zak. It was all I could do not to reach for him and pull him against me.

But we didn't do that anymore.

We didn't do a lot of things anymore.

I gave him a peck on the cheek. He started to turn his face like he was going to kiss me, but I pulled back. If I felt his mouth on mine, I'd do something I'd regret. I'd take all the anger and fear and guilt I was feeling out on the man I loved more than should be humanly possible, and I wouldn't do that to him.

He deserved better.

"Where is it?" I frowned. "He or she?" I added because I hated calling an animal "it."

"He," Zak said quietly. The hurt in his voice made my heart ache. As tough as Zak outwardly appeared, he felt more deeply than anyone I'd ever known. Whatever had happened to the newest member of our family had obviously cut him to the bone.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"Guest room."

I nodded because it wasn't uncommon for a new animal to need to be isolated from the rest of our little zoo until they could calm down a bit. I began heading that direction so I could have a look at the little – or possibly big – guy.

"Killian, wait..."

"It's fine, Zak," I called over my shoulder. "I'll just see how he's settling in."

"That's just it, he's not—"

“We’ll be fine,” I said as I turned and faced him while walking backward to the room that was located at the back of the house. “Maybe I can convince him to have some stew with us,” I added with a wink.

Once again, something flashed in Zak’s eyes, but I couldn’t tell what it was. It actually had me stopping in my tracks. But when I opened my mouth to ask him what was wrong, the words refused to come out.

“Killian,” Zak whispered softly.

It tore at my heart, but I couldn’t move.

Not toward him, anyway.

The need to escape was just too great.

I wasn’t sure how long we hung there until Zak broke the silence by saying, “Nana’s in there with him.”

I was almost disappointed that Zak had sidestepped confronting the truth of what was happening between us by bringing up the safer subject matter.

“I thought we weren’t going to let her inside anymore,” I said dutifully. It was a “fight” we had all the time, though it was just another meaningless conversation so we wouldn’t have to talk about anything real. Zak and I both knew that I didn’t care if Nana spent time in the house.

“She was out front when we got here and she had this calming effect on him, so I...” Zak was still holding on to Dash, probably as a way to hide his anxiety from me. The fact that the cat was bumping his head against Zak’s chest was proof enough that he sensed his owner’s tension and was trying to help ease it. Many of the animals had that same sensitivity, and I was afraid to admit that their toned-down behavior was because they all sensed what was happening between me and Zak.

It’d been that way for a while now.

“I’ll just peek in then,” I said, eager to escape Zak’s presence. But he followed me to the room and when I reached for the doorknob, his hand covered mine before I could turn it.

“I had to, Killian... he didn’t have anyone, and he was so fucking scared.”

Electricity spread up my arm and throughout my entire body. My heart pounded painfully against my chest. Zak’s touch... it was real. Not one of his quick little pats that was more awkward than anything else.

It’d been months since he’d touched me like this.

Since I’d *let him* touch me like this.

My eyes held Zak's shimmering ones. Zak was someone who could say more with one look than a mouthful of pretty words. When we'd met, he'd been wary and reserved and he'd worked hard to keep me from seeing what he was actually feeling, but over the years he'd come out of his shell and I'd met and fallen even more deeply in love with the real Zak. As fucked up as things had become between us, I was glad I could still see that part of him... that he hadn't hidden himself so deeply from me that I'd lost that final link to him.

"It's okay, baby," I whispered, and then I did what I hadn't dared do out in the living room. I kissed him.

Softly.

It was a mere brush of my lips over his.

But it was a direct punch to my heart because Zak let out the smallest of whimpers when I did it. He was the one to pull back and avert his eyes. He still had Dash in his arms and I was suddenly weirdly jealous that his grip on the cat tightened rather than him putting the animal down and reaching for me.

"We'll take care of him," I said, forcing myself to put a little more space between myself and Zak. "Just like we do all the others. He's family now, okay?"

Zak didn't respond, which surprised me.

But only for as long as it took for me to open the door and spot our new "family member" sitting quietly on the floor in the far corner of the room.

"Fucking hell," I muttered before I could stop myself.

CHAPTER TWO

ZAK

My lips were still tingling from Killian's kiss, but all the sensation evaporated when he let out the soft swear words. I was glad he managed not to raise his voice, because from the brief glance I was able to get through the crack in the door, the young man had finally fallen asleep.

I had to give that credit to Nana, though, because I'd been on the receiving end of her "mothering" on more than one occasion. The mini-horse had the uncanny ability to make you smile even when all you wanted to do was cry. She was also particularly good at picking out the soul that needed her most at any one time. Most of the rescue animals Killian and I had taken in had gotten a heavy dose of Nana-therapy upon arrival, and most of the dogs and cats still tended to gravitate to her if she was in the house.

Which she often was, even though Killian and I had agreed she should spend more time out in the barn with the other livestock, since she wasn't exactly housebroken. It wasn't something her previous owner – an elderly woman whose house had been overrun with so many cats and dogs that it'd been unsanitary – had worried about. The woman had passed away in the home, but the majority of her pets had survived after a concerned neighbor had complained to animal welfare authorities. The rescue group I volunteered for had been tasked with going in and helping to catch the animals. I'd pretty much fallen instantly in love with Nana when I'd found the emaciated mini in one of the bedrooms. Killian and I had only recently purchased the old farmhouse in rural Pennsylvania, so I'd known we'd have the room for the tiny horse. And my relationship with Killian had been in a

place where I'd known he would accept Nana without argument. My man had always seemed gruff and hardheaded to most people, but I wasn't most people.

At least, I hadn't been.

Now I wasn't sure what I was.

Killian carefully closed the door again and then pulled in a breath. "Who is he, Zak?"

I could hear the disbelief in his voice and I couldn't really blame him. After all, it was one thing to bring home countless foster animals that usually never left, but to bring home a virtual stranger was an altogether different story. I still couldn't believe I'd done it myself.

"I don't know his name. He wouldn't tell us."

"Us? You met him at the hospital?" Killian asked.

Dash bumped my chin over and over as he picked up on my building nerves. What if this was it? What if this was the moment where Killian said I wasn't worth all this and he was leaving? The demands I'd put on him after the events of the previous year...

I shook my head and then realized Killian thought it was my response because he said, "Where did you meet him?"

"No, I mean, yes, I met him at the hospital." I shook my head again and then mumbled, "Sorry."

Killian's fingers touched my chin as he forced me to look at him. We were pretty much the same height but ever since things had fallen apart, I'd reverted to my old behavior of not looking him in the eye. Shit like that had gotten me in trouble when I'd been a kid and the military had reinforced the submissive trait, so it had just become habit. Killian had been the first guy I'd ever felt safe enough with to look in the eye.

"So you met him at work," he prodded. I hated when he dropped his fingers because his touch had felt so warm and gentle. Dash let out a little meow when I inadvertently gripped him a little too hard in response to the loss.

"Sorry, sweetheart," I murmured to the cat, then forced myself to look at Killian again. "He came into the ER with this guy who'd been beaten up pretty badly. His friend was unconscious, but he refused to leave him... I was there when security tried to separate them so the patient could be taken for a CT scan and he," – I motioned toward the closed door with my chin – "lost it. His friend woke up when they were trying to cuff him and he

started ripping out his IV. It was chaos as he – the patient – started going after everyone who tried to touch his buddy.” I once again motioned to the door. “He was crying but that was the only sound he made. He never said the other guy’s name or anything. The patient managed to push everybody back and then he just collapsed.”

“Is he all right? The patient?” Killian asked.

“He was still unconscious when my shift ended. They moved him to ICU to monitor him for a brain bleed. I convinced the attending to let the kid go with his friend so we could keep an eye on him.”

“Was he hurt too? Are there any leads in the case?” Killian asked as he glanced at the closed door. My heart surged a bit at Killian’s questions. It’d been a long time since I’d heard the old, familiar Killian. Along with the warmth came an overwhelming wave of guilt.

He wasn’t the old, familiar Killian anymore because *I’d* made him change. *I’d* made him choose between the only thing he’d ever wanted to be and me.

He’d chosen me.

And I hated myself for it.

But I was too much of a coward to risk losing him... in any kind of way.

So I’d condemned us to this non-life where I’d gotten what I wanted, but not really.

I shook my head. “He’s not hurt. It was just the other guy. When I went up to check on them after my shift ended, one of the other nurses told me that one of the new security guards – that overzealous guard I was telling you about, remember – was trying to convince management to have the kid removed to the psych ward if he refused to leave his friend’s side and stay in the waiting room.”

Killian frowned, and I saw his hands tighten into fists. One of the things I’d loved from the start about Killian was his need to protect those who needed it most. Human or animal, he didn’t discriminate. Whoever needed to be watched out for, they got it from him.

Without question.

But it had also cost him.

And me.

It had cost so fucking much.

I shoved away my bout of self-pity and said, “When I went into the room, he was lying in the bed next to his friend. I knew what would happen

if he resisted being made to leave.”

“They wouldn’t have had any choice but to forcibly remove him,” Killian murmured. “How did you convince him to leave with you?”

“I told him the truth,” I said. “He was lying there staring at the wall. I hadn’t thought he’d heard me. I told him he could come stay with us and I’d take him back every day to see his friend until he woke up and they could be together again...”

“And that convinced him?” Killian asked in surprise.

I laughed but it wasn’t a real laugh. “Not even close. Security came in and things got ugly again, but this time his friend didn’t wake up and I think that scared him even more. They put the plastic cuffs on him because they were afraid he’d go after the staff like his friend had.”

I felt my throat close up as I remembered watching the horrific scene play out in front of me. “He fell to his knees and began sobbing and wailing... the sounds he made, Killian...”

I could feel the tears stinging the backs of my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. If I did, I’d be in Killian’s arms and I didn’t deserve to be there anymore. I instinctively felt Killian reach for me, but I stepped back before he could touch me. If he did that now, I’d fall so fucking hard and fast, I’d never recover. We’d been walking this emotional tightrope for so long that I didn’t know how to do anything else but just focus on keeping my footing.

“What did you do, baby?” Killian asked softly.

God, leave it to him to mortally wound me with nothing more than a few softly spoken words.

“I forced every one of them to leave the room... all of them. I cut him loose and held him until he stopped crying. He didn’t put up a fight when I urged him to come with me. He didn’t say no but he didn’t say yes, either. He never said a word. He just seemed... done.”

“You did the right thing, Zak.”

“I’ll probably get suspended... or worse,” I murmured. “I think the only reason the nursing chief didn’t do it on the spot was because I got the kid out of there.”

“She didn’t do it because she knows you’re the best fucking medical professional they have in that entire place,” Killian growled.

I almost smiled. Most people who found out I was a nurse always looked at me like they were wondering why I hadn’t become a doctor instead. Like maybe I hadn’t been smart enough or committed enough. It

was the same stereotypical bullshit that ran rampant in the industry. And of course, being a male nurse must mean I was gay. Sure, that part was true, but one had absolutely nothing to do with the other. I'd heard all of it enough that I didn't even react to any of that crap anymore, but if Killian was in the vicinity when someone dared to look sideways at me as they said, "Oh, you're a nurse?" then it was all I could do not to laugh as I had to hold him back, both figuratively and sometimes literally. The man was my most vocal supporter, and God help anyone who did anything but tell me how amazing they thought it was that I'd decided to go into nursing.

"So what's the plan?" Killian asked.

"Bonnie said she'd let me know if his friend woke up tonight. I figured I'd take him back tomorrow, assuming I still have a job there."

"You will," Killian responded, unconcerned.

"They didn't find any ID on either of them, so hopefully when the one wakes up, he'll give us the name of a family member."

"And tell the cops who beat him up," Killian murmured. "We need to make sure neither of them goes back to anyone that's hurting them."

I felt my insides twist at his use of the term "we." Would this be the thing that could maybe get us back on even footing? Could it be the starting point of a new beginning for us? Was it even fair to use the younger men's plight in such a way?

My stomach ached as I considered how low and desperate I'd become. "Right," I managed to respond to Killian, though all I really wanted to do was wrap my arms around him and tell him how fucking sorry I was.

I wanted to tell him he deserved better than me... than the man I'd become in my desperation not to lose him.

"Both of them seem to be over the age of eighteen, so I don't think the authorities can get involved once the older one is discharged," I continued.

"We'll figure something out when we get to that point," Killian said. I could see his mind already working through the problem in his head. It was what had made him such a good cop. He was able to look at crime scenes from all kinds of angles and he'd applied the same thinking to suspects.

Not was.

Had.

He *had* been able to look at crime scenes from all kinds of angles...

Because he wasn't a cop anymore.

I felt like I was going to throw up then and there. “I, um, need to go check the stew,” I said as I shoved Dash into Killian’s arms. The guilt was shredding my insides like the sharpest of claws. The darkness Killian had helped me find my way out of so long ago was like a shroud settling over familiar shoulders. Bile rose in my throat.

“Hey, Zak,” Killian called.

I stopped and forced myself to turn to look at him.

Please, God, let this be it. Let this be the moment he forces me to admit what I did.

“If you keep making my favorite foods every time you bring a stray home, I’m going to need some new jeans.”

My gaze drifted down to his lower body. His waist was trim and his muscular thighs rippled beneath the denim. The man didn’t have an extra ounce of fat on him.

Fuck, I missed how good his body felt against mine as he held me down and fucked me. We’d had sex here and there in the past year but there’d been something missing. We both got off, but there were no longer any lingering touches or whispered words.

I’d ruined that for us.

I’d ruined a lot of things.

“Yeah, right,” I managed to respond in a light voice, though my heart wasn’t in it. I also didn’t have it in me to tell Killian why I’d really made the stew.

That it’d had nothing to do with the young man in the other room and everything to do with wanting to make Killian happy, even if the only way I could do that now was in small ways.

I also didn’t have it in me to tell him the things I *really* needed to say.

That I loved him.

And missed him.

And that I was sorry that I’d fucked so many things up for him.

For me.

For *us*.

CHAPTER THREE

KILLIAN

I really hoped the kid didn't freak out.
I wasn't great with kids.
Or freak-outs.

Well, I supposed that wasn't quite true. I used to be good at dealing with freak-outs, but that had been a long time ago. A lot had changed since then.

And the bad with kids part was still true. I'd always gotten too emotionally invested when kids had been involved in a case I was working. I'd once been given the opportunity to work for the Special Victims Unit, which dealt specifically with crimes against kids and women, but one day of shadowing one of the lead detectives in the unit had answered that particular question for me. It might have been a good move career wise, but it hadn't taken more than going to the hospital to interview a twelve-year-old girl who'd been raped by her uncle to know I didn't have the stomach for the work. I'd ended up accepting a job in SWAT instead, and it'd been a perfect fit.

Until it had changed my entire fucking life.

I drew in a breath as I leaned heavily against the outside of the bedroom door. The tray with the bowl of stew and glass of water started to rattle as my hands shook. My tongue burned with the need for a shot of whiskey. I could practically feel the burn in my gut.

"Fuck," I muttered to myself.

It was Bentley nudging my leg that drew me out of the deep, dark abyss I'd started to fall into. My loyal old black lab whined as he sat at my feet, his soulful brown eyes watching me with concern.

“I’m good,” I murmured. “I’m good,” I repeated as I pulled in another draw of air. I knew I needed to be getting my ass to a meeting or, at the least, calling my sponsor, but the presence of the stranger made the former impossible. I’d call Delia as soon as I was done checking on the kid.

I steadied the tray as best I could and rapped my knuckles softly on the door. There was no response, so I was hoping that meant the kid was still asleep and I could just leave the stew for him. I’d promised Zak I’d look in on him, but truth be told, I wasn’t exactly happy about the responsibility. Zak was the one who was better with people. He was good at saying the right thing and knowing when to not say anything at all. I tended to be more blunt and to the point... it was kind of necessary in my line of work.

Well, it *had* been necessary.

I shook my head because I needed to stop feeling sorry for myself. It wasn’t like I’d been in any position to stay a cop anyway. Not after what had happened.

More saliva filled my mouth as the need for a drink suddenly overwhelmed me.

Jesus, I needed to get a grip. I’d been sober for a year. Twelve long fucking months. It shouldn’t be this hard anymore, should it?

Bentley nudged me again, reminding me where I was and what I was supposed to be doing. I slowly pushed open the door. My instinct to use the door as a shield while I checked all the corners of the bedroom kicked in. I kind of wished I still owned a gun, but my Glock and the shotgun we’d kept to warn off coyotes to protect our animals were gone.

I reminded myself what Zak had said about the kid and his behavior at the hospital. And from the brief glimpse I’d gotten of him when I’d opened the bedroom door earlier, he hadn’t looked like much of a threat. Especially since he’d been wearing scrubs instead of street clothes. Zak had said the clothes had been filthy, so he’d thrown them in the wash when he’d brought the boy home. There’d been no weapon or anything identifying among the boy’s belongings.

Because there hadn’t actually *been* any belongings.

The room was still pitched in darkness when I entered, so I set the tray down on the decorative table near the door. I could see the kid’s outline. He was still in the same corner of the room. The fact that he’d made no effort to turn any lights on or get in the bed meant he was likely still asleep.

Good news for me.

I quietly moved around the bed opposite the kid and turned the small lamp on the nightstand on. I froze when I glanced at the kid and saw he was indeed awake.

And clearly terrified.

He looked like a deer caught in headlights as his wide eyes held mine. His fingers were curled into Nana's long mane. At some point the mini-horse had lain down next to him. Normally, Nana would have come to greet me, but all she did was let out a little whinny when she saw me. Then she was rubbing her small muzzle against the kid's arm.

Except he wasn't really a kid.

I could see that now.

He was young, yes. But Zak had been right that the kid – young man – looked to be in his late teens. He had really light blond hair that was sticking up all over the place and appeared to be a little on the long side. Sharp angles and lines made up his face. His skin was pale, making his full, shiny red lips stand out in an almost sinful way.

My body physically reacted to the striking young man and I quickly turned away and pretended to fiddle with the lamp so I could turn the dimmer down to a lower setting.

"Hey, um, sorry," I babbled. "Didn't mean to wake you."

I wasn't really expecting a response, so I turned back to focus on getting the tray. "I brought you something to eat. Zak thought you might be hungry."

As I turned and headed for the young man, my eyes met his. He was breathing heavily and had curled himself into the corner as far as his body would allow. He'd released his hold on Nana and tugged his arms against his chest. I backtracked and went around to the opposite side of the bed again in the hopes that having the large piece of furniture between us would help ease his fears. But every time I looked his way, he tried to make himself smaller and smaller.

Fuck, Zak is the one who needs to be doing this shit.

"So, uh, Zak will be back in a little while. The hospital called and asked him to come in for a bit."

The sound of a whimper caught my attention and I quickly looked over. The kid – fuck, *young man* – was watching me with horrified eyes.

"Shit, sorry, not because of your friend," I quickly clarified as I realized what had made the guy look so stricken. "There was a pile-up on the

interstate and they needed a few extra hands.” When I saw the young man relax just a tiny bit, I hurried on. “No serious injuries, but the ER is packed... I’m sure Zak will check on your friend just as soon as he can but as far as I know, there’s been no change.”

The young man let out a breath and leaned back against the wall.

“I know you’re probably not hungry after everything you’ve been through, but try to take a few bites if you can.” I almost blurted out that he was too skinny but managed to catch myself. There were a million questions the cop in me wanted to ask, but I held my tongue. “Zak will come check on you when he gets home but if you need something before then, just let me know. I’m Killian, by the way.”

He didn’t respond.

Except to turn his head away from me and stare at the wall. Nana climbed to her feet and began nuzzling the young man’s face. I was glad when he at least reached out to pet her neck.

It meant he was still somewhat there.

The click-clack of nails on hardwood had me looking over at the half-open bedroom door. The dogs knew not to enter the room after I’d commanded them to stay outside, but Waldo was a different story.

Waldo didn’t do commands.

Like *ever*.

“Waldo,” I called as the bird click-clacked his way into the room. I hurried around the bed to intercept him. “Come here, buddy,” I said as I put my arm down to the ground in invitation. Waldo cocked his head as he looked at my arm, then he calmly sidestepped me. I didn’t reach for him because I didn’t want to startle him. Since I was the only one who was able to handle the bird, I always made sure not to do anything that would frighten him. The toucan’s trust was a fragile thing and I knew better than to risk it.

I watched Waldo approach the young man. I knew the bird wouldn’t get too close... he was just naturally curious about the stranger in his territory. The guy, on the other hand, was wide-eyed as he watched Waldo come to a stop about five feet from him.

But this time, his expression wasn’t about fear.

He was clearly fascinated by the colorful bird.

No surprise there, since it wasn’t every day you’d see a bird like Waldo walking around an old farmhouse in rural Pennsylvania.

Bird and man stared at each other. The funny little visual stand-off lasted for about a minute, then Waldo was on to the next thing. He turned and picked his way across the floor, making a wide berth around the small rug next to the bed, then came to a stop expectantly in front of me. I chuckled because his message was clear.

He was ready to be carried now.

I knelt down and offered him my arm. Waldo took his time climbing up it. I could feel the guy's eyes on me the whole time, but I avoided looking at him for fear of scaring him again. Once I had Waldo pressed against my chest, I turned to remind the young man to let me know if he needed anything. Our eyes connected and I felt it like a gut punch. He wasn't watching Waldo... he was watching *me*.

And with something besides the expected fear.

The overwhelming need to flee his presence suddenly evaporated. Warmth permeated my body as he stared at me and I at him. Like before, my body reacted, and shame curled through me as my cock twitched in my pants in anticipation. It wasn't like I'd never been attracted to other guys since meeting Zak, but something about this was... different.

Fuck, I needed to get the hell out of there. I was about to do just that when the young man's hand suddenly moved. He made a circular motion around his mouth, then pointed at Waldo. I stood there stupidly as my brain tried to catch up to my very distracted body. When he made the motion again, I finally got it.

"His beak?" I asked. "You want to know what happened to it?"

The fact that the guy was communicating with me filled me with a mix of elation and shame. Zak had said the young man hadn't reacted or talked to him in any kind of way. Yet here he was, asking *me* a question.

Maybe not in the traditional sense, but it was *something*.

And I shouldn't be having "something" with anyone but Zak.

The young man nodded in response.

Guilt and anger mixed together as I looked at Waldo. "The fucker who owned him beat the shit out of him because Waldo wouldn't learn to talk. Asshole didn't even bother to research if toucans *could* learn to talk... which they can't. He shattered Waldo's wings so badly he won't ever be able to fly again, and he pretty much ripped his beak off." I still had my eyes on Waldo when I heard a little rush of air. I glanced at the young man.

I was surprised to see that his eyes looked like they were shimmering with tears.

“Sorry,” I said when I realized I’d frightened him badly.

He shook his head and pointed at Waldo. It took me a moment to realize what he was saying... that he wasn’t upset about my show of anger, but about Waldo. He pointed to his own nose.

“Oh, um, I made it from a 3-D printer,” I explained as I turned Waldo so he could see the bird’s beak better. I dared to take a few steps forward so there’d be more light. “Zak got the printer for me a couple years back for my birthday. When we met Waldo, I remembered an article I’d seen about people using 3-D printers to make prosthetics both for people and animals... I wondered if it might work for Waldo, so I started playing around with it. The vet who volunteers for the animal rescue group agreed to help me design it. We didn’t think it would work, but the first time he used it to eat a piece of fruit...” I felt my throat clog with emotion because that moment had been about so much more than a bird getting a piece of himself back. It’d been like *I’d* gotten a piece of myself back.

The young man’s eyes shifted between me and Waldo. He nodded slightly and then leaned back against the wall. I couldn’t make sense of his reaction, but I was glad he no longer looked like he wanted to crawl inside the wall to escape me.

“I better go get him his treats,” I said. “He’s not exactly patient when it comes to food.” I sent the young man a wink and added, “Feel free to use the bed if you want. There’s a little set of steps on the other side of it for Nana.”

I smiled when the young man looked at me in surprise.

“Just a warning. She hogs the sheets,” I added with a pointed look at Nana. I swore I actually saw the young man almost smile, but I didn’t dare focus on his face long enough to confirm it. I held Waldo close as I left the room. My stomach was in knots by the time I closed the door behind me.

What the hell was happening to me?

The shame was overwhelming because I knew exactly what was happening.

I just didn’t want to believe it.

I wasn’t attracted to the young man in the other room. I just wasn’t.

And even if I was (which I definitely wasn’t), it didn’t matter because I loved Zak. My entire world was about Zak. It always would be. And it

wasn't like it was a crime to be attracted to someone else. I would never, ever act on it. Zak was the only one I wanted... would ever want. I just happened to feel sorry for the young man currently sitting in our guest room. That was all.

Pity.

I felt nothing more than pity.

Waldo chose that moment to press his beak pointedly against my chest, right in the spot where it felt like my heart was going to pound its way out of my body. I welcomed the distraction, and as I made my way to the kitchen, I dug out my cell phone and did something I'd hoped I wouldn't ever need to do again.

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CHAPTER FOUR

ZAK

I reacted on instinct rather than logic when the arm closed around my neck from behind. Fortunately, there must have been at least part of my brain that remembered where I was because when I grabbed the hand and twisted it before spinning and bending the arm back, I didn't use all my strength to snap the limb like I would have if I'd still been in the deserts of the Middle East.

The man I was holding in the painful position let out a little whimper, but surprisingly, didn't make another sound. He tried to fight back, but he was far too weak.

"Stop," I muttered as I loosened my hold a little bit.

"Where is he? Where's Noah?" the younger man responded.

"I'll tell you once you get your ass back in bed."

"Fu... fuck you," he countered. His eyes were downcast as he tried to fight through the pain his battered body was surely experiencing. I noticed that while he was still wearing his hospital gown, he had on a pair of scrub bottoms.

"Were you planning on going somewhere?" I asked as I released him. I caught him around the waist right when his knees gave out. Even as he leaned heavily against me, he struggled to escape my hold.

"Where is he? What did you do to him?"

"He's safe," I said. I half dragged, half carried him back to the bed and sat him down. "Noah? That's his name?" I asked.

The young man went mute and looked at me stonily. He was a couple of inches shorter than me and had a leaner frame, but my guess was that had more to do with his circumstances than it being his natural body size. There

was still a hint of muscle in his arms, but he'd clearly been missing some meals for a while. His shaggy hair was a pretty shade of brown that reminded me of Killian's eyes. But his eyes were an icy blue that made him look older than he probably was. I put him in his early twenties at best.

"Fine, what's *your* name?"

"Fuck you."

"Okay, Fuck You, why the act?" I responded easily as I began trying to check the spot where he'd ripped the IV out of the back of his hand and halfheartedly covered it with the tape that had been holding the needle in. He yanked his hand away from me. "You always pretend to be asleep and then attack people who are just trying to help you?" I asked as I pushed the privacy curtain back. I doubted the little shit would be stupid enough to try and attack me again without the privacy to do so.

"Where's Noah? I want to see him now!" he demanded. He had the air of someone who was used to getting what he wanted, and that automatically rubbed me the wrong way. I'd met plenty of kids like him when I'd been a teenager and one of the foster families I'd stayed with had enrolled me in the hoity-toity high school in their well-to-do neighborhood. I'd been looked down on from the moment I'd walked through the front door. It hadn't mattered that the family had dressed me to look just like the rich little fuckers... they'd recognized me for what I was as soon as they'd laid eyes on me. Luckily, I hadn't had to stay at that school long... and it had been my last school, period, until I'd enrolled in nursing school.

I ended up being wrong about the guy being stupid enough to attack me again in full view of others because he lunged upward and took a swing at me. I caught his fist just before it connected with my chin and used his own momentum to swing him around. He groaned when I shoved him face-first down on the bed and planted my hand in the center of his back. I used only enough pressure to keep him in the position, thinking he'd give up after a second or two. But he didn't let up.

"If you touched him, I'll kill you!" he shouted. "I'll fucking kill you!"

"Enough!" I ordered as I pinned him with part of my body to keep him from hurting himself.

"Someone call security!" I heard one of the floor nurses yell. Then she was calling for Geodon, a powerful sedative that would knock the young man out.

“No!” I called to her. “We’re fine,” I said firmly as I looked over my shoulder at her. “We’re fine.” Already I could feel the young man’s strength failing him. I leaned over him and said, “If they drug you, you’ll be out for hours and they’ll probably call the cops or transfer you to the psych ward since you’re clearly a danger to yourself and others. Is that what you want? How are you going to protect him then?”

My instinct was right because he stopped fighting me almost instantly. I eased my hold on him enough to see if he’d start battling me again.

He didn’t.

His breath was coming in heavy, painful pants that had me worried. I eased my weight off him and checked to see if Bonnie, the young nurse, had heeded my warning not to call for security. She and one of the older nurses were watching from the doorway. The older nurse nodded and then tugged Bonnie away, letting the door slide closed behind them.

I helped the young man sit up.

“Where is he?” he said as soon as he’d managed to catch his breath.

“He’s safe,” I said as I pulled my stethoscope from my neck and began listening to his lungs through the gown. He didn’t jerk away from me this time, but he did tense up. “I assume from your little blitz attack that you somehow figured out Noah was with me?”

“I heard them talking,” he responded as he motioned in the direction of the door. “They were talking to each other about how ‘Zak’ took Noah out of here. You’re the only guy who’s been in here to see me. The other doctor was a woman.”

“I’m not a doctor,” I said as I focused my attention on the wound on the young man’s hand. It was bleeding more heavily so I applied some gauze and put pressure on it.

“What are you, a nurse or something?” he asked snidely as he eyed my scrubs.

“Yeah, Fuck You, I’m a nurse. A male nurse. A male nurse who could have drop-kicked you from here to the next county if he wanted to but chose to take care of your ungrateful ass instead.”

I wasn’t someone who ever let his temper out on a patient, but this particular one was pissing me off like nobody’s business, and I wasn’t sure why. I attributed my anger to the issues I’d been having with Killian and our houseguest, who, apparently, was named Noah.

Noah had only been with us for a couple of days, but from the moment I'd gotten back from being called to the hospital after the pile-up that had led to the ER being overwhelmed, Killian had been acting strange. For starters, as soon as I'd walked in the door, he'd left the house without telling me where he was going. He'd sent me a text ten minutes later saying he was going to an AA meeting.

I'd been stunned.

And hurt.

Really fucking hurt.

Killian had been going to AA for the better part of a year, but he hadn't been to a meeting in a couple of months. He'd insisted that he didn't need to go on a regular basis anymore, and I'd believed him. I also hadn't seen any behavior to indicate he'd reverted to relying on alcohol to numb his feelings. The fact that he'd gone to one hadn't been what had hurt, though it did worry me a little. What had ripped out my heart was the fact that he'd waited until after he'd left to tell me.

Had he thought I'd judge him? Or nag him to tell me what was causing the sudden need?

Okay, yes, admittedly I *would* have wondered if I'd done something wrong, but I wouldn't have asked him about it.

I froze in place when I heard my own words play through my head.

I wouldn't have asked him about it...

Jesus, when had we become these people? We'd always told each other everything. Killian was everything to me... boyfriend, lover, soulmate, best friend...

But now... now I couldn't help but question everything I said and did around him. I'd forced him to give up so much for me that it wasn't fair to ask him for anything else, right?

"So am I going to live or what?"

The voice ripped me from my thoughts. I lifted my eyes to see the young man watching me intently. He'd said the words with the same snide tone he'd used when he'd asked me if I was a nurse, but there was something about the way he was looking at me that seemed... off. Like what was coming out of his mouth didn't match what was in his head.

My gaze drifted over his bruised face. His cheeks and one eye were black and blue, and he had small lacerations on his chin and one side of his face. There was a larger gash that'd needed stitching along his temple and

another on the back of his head. They were the reason doctors had been watching him for a brain bleed, though the tests, fortunately, had shown no internal damage. The young man's knuckles were also badly bruised, proof he'd fought back against his attacker or attackers.

Once the swelling and bruising cleared up, I had no doubt the guy would be gorgeous. Put some weight on him and he'd be a heartstopper.

He reminded me of a younger version of Killian.

Though Killian's gruffness had been pretty easy to see through.

I wasn't so sure about this guy.

Then I remembered the way he'd defended his friend.

Noah.

The beautiful, quiet Noah.

"Yeah," I muttered as I realized the direction my thoughts had taken. It made me feel both ashamed and empty.

I missed Killian.

"You'll live," I added as I finished bandaging the guy's hand. I'd need to start a new IV, but I'd have to use his other hand. "I'll be back in a second. I need to get you a new IV bag."

"No, wait," the guy said as he grabbed my arm. Sparks lit up my skin where he was touching me.

Dangerous, shameful sparks that made a little part of me die inside.

Those sparks belonged to Killian.

Only Killian.

I pulled my arm free of his hold. He looked startled but didn't reach for me again. "I'm sorry," he said in surprise. I nearly laughed at the irony. Five minutes ago he'd been trying to beat the shit out of me, yet one little touch and my over-the-top reaction to it had him apologizing. "Please, I need to see Noah. He... he needs me."

Something in his voice had me setting aside my confusion and self-disgust. I'd just assumed they were friends, but maybe there was more there?

I couldn't put words to the strange sensations running through me as I pictured the two young men together in a not-quite-intimate but not-quite-friends-only embrace.

"He's okay, I promise. He's staying at my house with me and my partner," I said as I moved closer to him. "He wanted to come back here to

see you, but he had a little bit of a cough this morning and was running a temperature before I left.”

Predictably, the young man jumped to his feet. “What? He’s sick? I have to see him!”

I managed to catch him when his knees gave out after taking one step. I was practically holding him upright as I said, “I swear to you, he’s okay. Killian is keeping an eye on him and will call me if his temperature continues to climb. It’s probably a touch of the flu.” I managed to get him sitting on the edge of the bed again. “He was asleep when I left, and I already cleared it with my boss to end my shift early today so I could go home and check on him.”

“Let go,” the man snapped as he shoved my hands away and tried to stand on his own again. “I’m fine! I don’t need your help, Nurse Man!”

I released him only long enough to nearly let him fall on his ass. When I caught him for the second time, I bit out, “Listen, Fuck You. You *are* going to sit down. Whether you do it on the floor or on this bed is entirely up to you!”

Not surprisingly, he tried to shove me away. “Fuck off! Get your hands off me!”

“Jesus, you’re a piece of work,” I snapped. Despite my threat, I ended up putting him back on the bed and using my hands on his shoulders to hold him there. Luckily, his body was giving up the fight and he didn’t do anything more than call me a few names.

“Look, Fuck You, your friend—”

“Liam, all right?! My fucking name is Liam! And he’s my brother!”

I pulled in a breath at that. Okay, so maybe I hadn’t seen what I thought I had between the two. But the way Noah had held Liam’s head on his lap after he’d passed out in the ER just seemed... *not* brotherly.

“Liam,” I began. “I can’t bring Noah here if he’s sick. He’d be a risk to patients with compromised immune systems. And you’re not ready to leave the hospital—”

“Yes, I am. I’m leaving,” Liam shot back. “I’ll leave with that AMA thing... against medical advice. Where do I sign the paper that says that?”

I searched deep for every ounce of patience I had because for some inexplicable reason, the idea of Liam running around out there with his level of injuries and no one to watch out for him scared the hell out of me.

It was the same feeling I'd had when I'd thought of broken little Noah being put in a jail cell or psych ward.

"He'll be better in a day or two. I promise, I'll bring him to see you then."

"No! I want out of here. I can take care of him. You can't keep me from him... that's kidnapping or some shit like that. He's nineteen... an adult," Liam shouted, his frustration and anger building with every word. He reached for the bed controller and hit the call button over and over again. He used his other hand to tug at the hospital gown he was wearing. "Where are my clothes?" he asked as he climbed to his feet. I reached for him, but he waved me off and held on to the end of the bed as his body wobbled wildly.

The door slid open to reveal a worried-looking Bonnie. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes," I began.

"No!" Liam cut in, his voice filled with pain. "I want to leave. You guys can't keep me here!"

Bonnie looked between me and Liam. "Should I call Dr. Anderson?"

"No!" Liam grated out as he took a few steps forward, clearly intent on getting to one of the two closets in the room. He'd likely gotten the scrub bottoms from the closet that was closer to the bed. Whatever personal possessions he'd had on him, including his clothes, were probably in the other closet.

"Yes, please page her," I said to Bonnie.

"No! I just want to leave," Liam snapped.

"You're asking to leave against medical advice, Liam," I said as calmly as I could. "The hospital needs to actually advise you about the risk before you can decline it." I went to his side in case he lost his balance again.

"Fine. But don't try to give me anything to knock me out. I know my rights."

I didn't point out the fact that the doctor could and likely would place him on a psych hold with the way he was raging at everyone. Not to mention that the people he'd taken swings at in the ER could have him arrested for assault. No, the charges wouldn't stick, but it would have been a way to supervise his medical condition for a bit longer. My gut was telling me he was out of danger, but I was still reluctant to watch him walk out of the hospital. It would take him a while to figure out where Killian and I

lived, but that was the least of my concerns. It was unseasonably cold outside, and something told me Liam and Noah didn't exactly have a place to go.

I found myself reaching for Liam's arm when he nearly pitched forward into the closet as he struggled to get the bag with his clothes out.

Just as I'd suspected, all that was in the bag was clothes, and he didn't seem surprised by that. He didn't ask where his wallet was or any kind of luggage.

What he had in the bag was likely all he had.

Besides his brother.

And Noah hadn't had anything besides a dirty set of clothes either.

"Okay, okay," I said as Liam lost his balance and practically fell against me. I put my arm around his waist. He let out a harsh breath as the exhaustion seemed to hit him all at once.

"I'm fine," he whispered against my neck, his lips ghosting over my skin as he spoke.

"Let's make a deal, okay, Fuck You?" I said lightly. Before he could wind himself up to protest, I added, "You sit down and let Dr. Anderson examine you and explain the risks involved with you discharging yourself against medical advice."

"No, she'll drug me to make me stay."

"No, she won't. She won't treat you without your consent, especially if you listen to everything she says. But if you go off on her like you did me, you're facing a psych hold which can last up to three days. The hospital won't need your consent for that."

"Why are you telling me this?" Liam asked, his voice full of suspicion.

I didn't answer him because I didn't want to open that particular can of worms. Actually, it was more like a fucking bucket. Instead, I gently urged Liam back a few steps. I was ecstatic when he didn't fight me.

Though I had no idea why.

There was no explaining how I'd become so emotionally invested in the two brothers' well-being so fast.

It wasn't until I had Liam sitting again and I began straightening his gown that he whispered, "If I do this, you'll take me to see Noah?"

I looked him in the eyes and saw that some of the coldness I'd seen earlier had been replaced with a nearly painful level of vulnerability. I couldn't help but wonder if it was more than just *Noah* needing *him*.

It probably went the other way too.

I nodded and then sent a silent apology to Killian because it looked like I was bringing home yet another stray.

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CHAPTER FIVE

KILLIAN

I managed to go less than twenty-four hours without seeing the kid.
Okay, fine, more like twelve hours.

That was because the morning after I'd attended my first AA meeting in over three months, Zak had asked me to bring the kid some breakfast since he'd been running late for work. He'd been home by lunch time but by then I'd noticed the kid had started to cough and for some inexplicable reason, I'd been checking in on him every hour even once Zak had taken over babysitting duties. If Zak had noticed both my reluctance to be around the kid as well as my inability to stay completely away from him, he hadn't said anything.

That was because he hadn't said much of anything *at all*.

Yes, Zak and I were still talking, but we weren't *talking*.

I knew I'd hurt him by not telling him before I'd left the house that I'd felt the need to go to an AA meeting, but what was I supposed to do? Tell Zak that our houseguest's presence was throwing me for a loop? That just being around the probably barely legal teenager had me craving something that I had only ever felt around Zak?

Yeah, that would go over well.

And now the kid was legitimately sick and I was worried as fuck, despite Zak's reassurances that it was likely just the flu. The plan had been for Zak to only go to work for a few hours, just long enough to check on the young man who'd been hospitalized and to follow up on some other patients. He'd asked me to check the kid's temperature and call him if it went above a certain number, and while I logically knew the kid wasn't in any kind of danger, every time I'd left the room after taking his

temperature, I'd started to worry that I'd missed some sign that he was in serious danger. The more I'd resisted checking on him, the more the memories had started to assault me one by one and my hands had started to shake with the need for a drink. Since an AA meeting had been out of the question until Zak was home, I'd done the only thing that had brought me any measure of relief.

I'd taken up vigil in the kid's room... and was still there, even with Zak on his way home.

The kid had been asleep most of the morning, waking only long enough for me to take his temperature and give him some medicine to try and keep him more comfortable. Fortunately, he'd moved to the bed at some point and Nana, predictably, hadn't left his side, though I had made the mini-horse get off the bed a little while earlier when the kid had started to shift restlessly. As calm as Nana was, she wasn't exactly the best bedmate. I'd taken her outside to the barn so she could eat with the other livestock and get some fresh air, so it was just me and the kid in the room.

And Waldo, of course.

I'd purposefully kept Skittles and Blueberry from entering the room, but Waldo had started banging his beak against the closed door until I'd relented and let him come inside. The last thing I'd wanted was for Waldo to do more damage to his beak. The bird was currently poking through a few of the plants that were on the window seat in the room.

I glanced at my watch to check the time. Zak had texted me that he was on his way home. I wasn't sure if I'd still feel the urge to go to a meeting once Zak took over caring for the kid, but if I did, I'd need to man up and tell Zak *before* I left the house, rather than waiting until afterwards to send him a fucking text message.

My drinking was another one of those things that Zak and I just didn't talk about, and I didn't really want that to change. I'd done enough damage to our relationship when my need for alcohol had spiraled out of control a year earlier. I didn't want to burden Zak with all the demons that were still running through me. We were supposed to be getting back on track and even if it was awkward as hell, I didn't want to muddy the waters with the shit I should have been able to just deal with by now.

The kid whimpering distracted me from my thoughts of Zak, and I immediately got up from the chair and went to the bed. The younger man was stirring restlessly, and I could see a sheen of sweat lining his brow.

Was he having a run-of-the-mill nightmare or was his body reacting to the illness? What if his temperature had spiked in the past hour and I hadn't noticed?

I felt the tell-tale tremble in my fingers as anxiety had my belly twisting and turning uncomfortably.

The kid's mewling grew louder and his limbs began jerking a bit more.

"Hey," I said as I reached for the thermometer. It was one that just had to be run over the kid's forehead, but with the way he was moving around, I knew I wouldn't be able to get a reading. A glance at the bedside clock showed that Zak was a few more minutes out at least. I told myself to just leave the kid be until Zak got home, but the more he thrashed, the more I began to panic.

"Hey, kid," I called, raising my voice in the hopes it would stir him from his sleep.

Please, God, let him just be sleeping.

"Hey," I repeated, then I put my hand on his upper arm so I could try and touch his forehead to see how hot it was.

Before I could even make contact with his skin, he let out a piercing screech and jerked himself away from me. His back slammed into the headboard and then he practically fell off the bed in his haste to escape. His eyes were as wide as saucers. He was still wearing the scrubs Zak had brought him home in, though they were now damp with sweat.

I put my arms up as the kid scrambled across the floor to reach the corner he'd first been in. His arms shielded his face as he tried to tuck himself into as small a ball as he could. My heart slammed in my chest at the defensive move.

"Hey, it's okay, it's just me, Killian. Remember? I'm Zak's friend?"

I wasn't even sure how aware the kid was and if he remembered Zak... or me. He'd seemed too tired to fight me earlier when I'd brought him the medication and something to drink.

He definitely wasn't tired now.

I slowly went around the bed. I could hear Waldo squawking behind me, clearly upset by the disturbance. But my eyes were only for the terrified kid. I kept my moves slow and easy as I knelt in front of the young man. "I just want to make sure you're feeling alright," I said quietly. "You've been feeling a bit under the weather."

My words seemed to have no effect on him whatsoever. In fact, his breathing worsened and he was crying hysterically.

Fuck, I needed to get him calmed down. On the one hand, I thought leaving the room might help ease his terror, but on the other, I was afraid of what would happen if he experienced some kind of emergency while I wasn't present. What if his harsh breathing was a result of his illness and not the panic attack I was suspecting?

"Can you try and slow your breathing for me just a bit?" I asked. I made sure not to get any closer to him.

He ignored me and began clawing at the wall.

"Fuck," I whispered as I snatched my phone out of my pocket and dialed Zak's number. "Buddy, do you have a history of asthma?" I asked the kid as I watched him trying to drag in huge gulps of air.

I was about to hang up on Zak so I could dial 911 when he answered.

"Zak, there's something wrong with the kid," I said. My voice was calm because that was how I'd been trained to react to situations like this, but inside I was struggling to maintain control.

What if the guy died before help could arrive?

Zak's voice was even and calm as well as he said, "Tell me what's happening to him, Killian. What are his symptoms?"

I was so caught up in describing the kid's behavior that I didn't notice Waldo until he had gotten past me and was just a foot from the kid. When I made a lunge to grab the bird so he wouldn't make the situation worse, the young man wailed. To my surprise, Waldo actually pecked at the back of my hand rather than trying to escape my reach. The bird backed up several steps until he was nearly touching the kid. I could hear the dogs barking outside the door, presumably because of all the noise they could hear coming from inside the room.

"What the fuck? Get away from him!"

I had no clue who spoke the words, but it was pure pandemonium after that. Someone grabbed me from behind and with the way I was crouching on the floor, I couldn't catch my own weight in time to keep from hitting the floor. "Don't fucking touch him!" the same voice shouted, then a punch caught me square along the jaw.

I tuned everything else out as my training kicked in. The weight on top of me was easy enough to dislodge and in one swift move, I was the one on top. But the guy who'd tackled me wasn't going down without a fight and

he used every weapon in his arsenal to come at me. Legs, hands, words... they were all thrown at me at once.

I used my heavier weight to pin the guy to the floor and then braced my forearm across his throat and applied pressure. Predictably, the lack of oxygen had him quickly focusing on trying to get just my arm off his neck rather than coming at me with his entire body. I caught one of his hands with my free one and pinned it to the floor.

I was dimly aware of dogs barking, birds squawking, the kid sobbing, and Zak yelling, but I let all that slip away as I focused on my assailant. No way I was letting him anywhere near Zak or the kid.

No fucking way.

The guy beneath me began to turn blue. "Stop fighting it, asshole," I muttered. My goal wasn't to kill him... just get him to pass out. But the guy was still struggling against me.

"D... do...don't..." he gasped. "T... touch... him," he managed to get out.

"Killian, let him go! I brought him here!"

Zak's words registered somewhere in the back of my mind and I finally started to take notice of the young man lying beneath me. His eyes, which had been bright with fury when he'd first attacked me, looked afraid, but I noticed he wasn't looking at me.

He was looking in the direction of the kid.

So the guy wasn't scared for himself, even though he really should be. No, he was terrified for the young man Zak was currently trying to calm down.

I loosened my grip on the man beneath me just a little. "Who are you?" I asked as I took in his bruised face and the dirty clothes he was wearing. He smelled god-awful and if I hadn't still been concerned for Zak and the kid's safety, I would have released him just because of the stench.

Several of the dogs were nervously pacing around the room and I could hear Waldo shrieking up a storm behind me. I glanced over my shoulder to see the toucan was pecking wildly at Zak's leg as Zak spoke softly to the young man in the corner. He had his hands on the kid's face.

"Breathe in and hold it," Zak instructed. The kid was hanging onto Zak's wrists and shaking his head.

"Let me up!" the guy beneath me shouted. "He needs me!"

I looked down at him and saw that he still had that look of absolute terror in his eyes. I loosened my hold on him.

“Zak?” I questioned.

“Do it,” Zak responded, not raising his voice even a little. He was focused solely on the kid.

I released the man beneath me and climbed off him. He scrambled past me.

“Noah, I’m here,” the guy said softly as he took Zak’s place. I swore I heard the kid — Noah, apparently — let out another whimper. “Just focus on me, Noah,” the guy said. “It’s just you and me, right?”

Several beats passed before Noah managed a nod. He was clinging to the guy’s wrists like he had been Zak’s, but some of the fear had abated and I saw him hold his breath. The guy started counting backward from ten. When he reached one, Noah released his breath.

“Good, again,” the guy whispered encouragingly. I could almost feel Noah basking in his approval.

Zak took a few steps back from the pair. Waldo had calmed considerably and was watching the interaction between the two younger men. I couldn’t really blame the bird because I found myself mesmerized by how in tune the two young men seemed to be with one another.

“You okay?” I heard Zak ask, and then I felt his hand closing over mine. I thought he was actually taking my hand to hold it, but instead, he started examining the back of it where there was a small puncture wound that was welling with blood. I barely managed to hide my disappointment.

Which made no sense.

Why the fuck was I disappointed that my partner was just doing his job?

I nodded. “Waldo got me,” I said. “Did he get you too?” I asked as I looked down at Zak’s leg. Thankfully, I didn’t see any blood seeping through his scrubs.

“No, the scrubs helped. Don’t think he broke the skin at all. Crazy bird,” Zak responded, though there was no actual anger in his voice.

“He was defending him,” I said.

“What?” Zak asked as he looked at me in surprise.

“The kid—”

“Noah,” Zak offered.

“Right, Noah. Noah was upset, and I made the mistake of reaching for Waldo. I think he thought I was going to grab Noah...” The name sounded

strange on my tongue, but as I looked at Noah, my brain quickly adjusted to having a name to go with the beautiful young man's face. My gaze shifted to the other man who looked to be a couple of years older than Noah. His face was pretty badly beaten up and I could see that his knuckles were bruised too. I remembered the story Zak had told me about Noah's friend who'd been admitted to the hospital after being badly beaten.

"His friend?" I asked. As if sensing my eyes on them, the older of the two glanced at me. His blatant defiance and hostility did something strange to me that I couldn't put my finger on. Although he was still speaking softly to Noah, whose breathing was starting to even out, the guy's eyes sent me a very clear message.

"Liam," Zak said softly. "They're brothers."

So that explained Liam's rush to attack me. He'd assumed I was hurting his brother and had come into the room guns blazing. But the more I watched the pair, the more something about them seemed off to me.

Not wrong, just... *off*.

I held my tongue as Zak moved to the young men's sides. Noah automatically pushed against Liam who took him protectively in his arms. Liam's intense blue eyes tracked Zak's every move and I automatically found myself moving closer to Zak in response.

"It's okay, Killian," Zak said calmly, his eyes on Liam. "Liam and I have already had a little talk about how he's got nothing to fear from us."

When he said "talk," Liam flinched slightly, then actually blushed.

What the hell?

A strange look passed between the two men and then Zak looked over his shoulder at me. He winked at me in the way he'd used to when he wanted to let me know everything was okay.

I hadn't seen that wink in a really long time.

Its impact was devastating. The keen sense of loss I felt nearly sent me to my knees. Something must have shown in my expression because Zak's grin slipped away, and he dropped his eyes. He returned his attention back to Liam, who was still holding Noah in his arms. Waldo had taken up a post by Noah's leg. If I hadn't been so preoccupied with everything else that was going on, I would have been very proud of my little warrior bird.

"Noah, I know all this is scary, but I really need to check your temperature and take a listen to your lungs. Will you let me do that? Liam will stay here with you the whole time, okay?"

My concern for Noah returned as I noticed that although he was breathing normally again, he still looked really flushed and sweaty.

Liam lifted his hand to Noah's forehead. Not surprisingly, Noah didn't resist the contact. His arms were wrapped tight around his brother, but he was watching Zak. When his green eyes shifted to me, I found myself trying to smile and nod as if I could somehow encourage him.

Who the fuck was I kidding?

Thirty seconds ago I'd scared him so badly that he'd flung himself out of the bed to get away from me.

Liam frowned when he felt Noah's forehead, then he dropped his mouth to his brother's ear and whispered something to him. I shivered because the whole thing was oddly intimate and instead of weirding me out, it did something else entirely.

Whatever Liam said to Noah had the younger man shaking his head and pressing harder against Liam. I could see Liam's hand running up and down Noah's back. It would periodically stray to the back of Noah's neck. I got so caught up in the sight of Liam's long, strong fingers caressing that spot where Noah's hair met his skin that I didn't hear Zak at first.

"Babe, it's behind you."

"What?" I practically croaked. Liam's eyes were on me and it felt like they were seeing something they shouldn't be.

"My bag. It's behind you," Zak said as he nodded to a spot just behind me. I turned to look and finally noticed that several of the dogs were in the room with us but had dropped to the floor as if sensing the tension and not wanting to contribute to it. Skittles and Blueberry were standing near Bentley. I finally noticed Zak's medical bag lying at Bentley's front feet, like he'd been protecting it or something.

"Right," I said dumbly as I hurried to grab the bag. I didn't bother kicking the animals out of the room because they were all keeping their distance from the two young men in the corner.

I handed the bag to Zak, then took a few steps back from the trio when Liam looked up at me in silent warning. I wondered if it was because he believed I'd hurt his brother or if it was because he was seeing something in my reaction to this whole mess that shouldn't have been there in the first place.

"Noah, I'm just going to check your temperature, okay? I just need you to tilt your head back a little so I can run this across your forehead."

“He’s not stupid,” Liam snapped. “You don’t need to talk to him like he’s a kid. He doesn’t talk but he understands you just fine!”

Liam’s outburst had me stiffening, but Zak only hesitated a moment before saying, “I’m not talking to him like he’s a kid, Liam. I’m talking to him like he’s someone who doesn’t feel good right now and isn’t sure what’s happening around him. I like to explain to all my patients what I’m doing and why.”

Zak’s patience was enviable because it was all I could do not to tell Liam to show some fucking respect.

For his part, Zak continued on with his exam as if Liam hadn’t said anything at all. “Your temperature is a bit higher than it was this morning, Noah, but your lungs sound clear, so that’s good. I’d say you definitely have the flu so you’re going to be spending the next several days in bed drinking lots of fluids and getting plenty of rest, okay?” Zak looked at Noah as he spoke but then his eyes shifted to Liam and I swore I saw something pass between them again.

Jesus, what was wrong with me?

“Liam, can you help me get him back to bed?”

When Zak went to reach for one of Noah’s arms, Liam was the one who shot his hand out to stop him. “Don’t touch him. I’ll do it,” he bit out.

“Hey,” I snapped as I stepped forward, but then Zak was in my space and putting his hands on my arms to hold me back.

“It’s okay, Killian,” he said softly. “Let’s give them a few minutes.”

Zak’s body being pressed so close to mine helped me leash my anger at Liam’s show of disrespect. I pulled in a breath and took in Zak’s familiar scent. My heart ached as I fought the urge to put my arms around him and just hang on for dear life. I wanted to do what Liam had been doing. I wanted to give and receive that comfort that Zak and I had only ever brought to each other.

But Zak stepped away from me and grabbed his bag, then began quietly herding all the animals out of the room.

Except Waldo.

The toucan looked happy right where he was... at Noah’s side. The bird was rubbing his beak on the young man’s outer thigh.

I was oddly jealous.

Problem was, I wasn’t exactly sure who I was jealous of... the bird... or the boy.

Okay, yeah, I did know.
And wasn't that the *real* fucking problem?

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CHAPTER SIX

ZAK

“It’s fine,” Killian said as I reached for his face to look at the bruise on his lower jaw. I’d already patched up his hand from where Waldo had apparently pecked at him. I was shocked that the bird had actually gone after Killian like he had.

I dropped my fingers to the table and let my eyes linger on Killian’s hand. I reached for another Band-Aid, though the wound didn’t really need a second one. It was an excuse to keep touching him.

And to avoid talking about what the hell had just happened in the other room.

“I guess you should have taken the vet’s advice and not made Waldo’s beak so sharp when you printed it,” I murmured.

Killian didn’t respond and I hadn’t really expected him to, since we both knew the answer to that particular issue. Killian had insisted that Waldo be able to experience things like his wild brothers and sisters, and that included being able to use the sharp tip of his beak to stab at fruit and peel it himself rather than us doing it for him. Since Waldo had been so terribly mistreated, we’d known that he could end up hurting one of the other animals or us if he felt threatened, but he’d never actually done anything.

Until today.

I also knew it wouldn’t change anything for Killian.

Or me.

“He was pretty awesome in there, wasn’t he?” I said softly as I considered how valiantly Waldo had fought for the young man he’d decided

needed protecting. My own leg hurt where he'd pecked at me, but he hadn't managed to break the skin.

"We might need to rename him Cujo," Killian said. I looked up when I heard the smile in his voice.

It was in his eyes too.

God, how long had it been since I'd seen it there?

My throat felt tight and it was all I could do not to blurt out how much I'd missed him.

How much I *did* miss him.

"So no stew this time?"

"What?" I asked in confusion as I tried to rein in my emotions and keep my voice even. It took me several seconds to remember the joke he'd made about me making him his favorite meals as a way to butter him up whenever I brought a new stray home. I found myself dropping my eyes again. "He was going to leave AMA whether I did something or not," I responded. "I didn't want him out there in his condition..."

When Killian didn't respond, I looked up. His expression was unreadable.

Fuck, how long had it been since he hadn't been able to hide himself from me like that? Or even tried?

The ugly bruise on his jaw was like a beacon drawing me in, but not in a good way. "I'm sorry," I said as I fixated on the black-and-blue mark. "I answered your call through the car's Bluetooth so he heard you talking about Noah's condition, and we'd just pulled up to the house and he was out of the car before I'd even put it in park—"

"It's fine, Zak," Killian interrupted. I held my breath when it looked like he was going to reach for me, but when he drew his hand back from mine instead, I felt like someone had stabbed me straight through the heart. "So you want them to stay a few days?" he asked.

You.

A few days earlier when it'd been just Noah, he'd said us.

We.

That *we'd* help Noah.

Now it was "you" and he was putting a time limit on the whole thing. No, he hadn't said that exactly, but it was obvious I'd gone over the line with all this.

And he was completely right.

But how was I supposed to explain that to him?

How was I supposed to tell him that something about Liam and Noah drew me to them in a way I didn't understand?

"A few days," I agreed with a nod. "If it's okay with you. If not, I can take them back to the hospital. I can probably get them to admit Noah and I'm sure Liam will agree to being readmitted himself—"

"It's fine," Killian said.

Fine.

I fucking hated that word.

Killian and I used it way too much now.

"I think we need to keep an eye on the older one, though," Killian added, his voice growing cooler. "He's got an attitude and I don't like the way he talked to you—"

I nearly laughed as I considered what Killian would have thought about Liam actually attacking me like he had in the hospital room.

"He's protective of his brother," I cut in. "You saw them together... they've obviously been through a lot, and his behavior reminds me of..."

I let my words fall away as I realized what I'd been about to say.

Of you.

Killian's gaze shifted so that he was looking around the kitchen. If he knew what I'd been about to say, he didn't show it.

"A few days," I repeated. "Noah should be well enough to travel by then and Liam's injuries should be better too."

I could see Killian's restlessness growing, because he was alternating between drumming his fingers on the table and running them through his hair. He got up and went to the sink so he could look out the window overlooking the back yard. He tapped his fingers on the countertop.

"I should let Nana in," he murmured. "She'll help calm the younger one down." Before I could respond, he headed for the back door.

"Killian," I called, even though I had no clue what to say. It somehow felt like our relationship had just turned some dark, jagged corner. Was such a thing even possible considering all that had already happened to us?

Killian paused as he was halfway through the back door, but he didn't look at me. His eyes were staring straight ahead. "I'm going to run into town for a bit," he said softly. "Do you need anything?"

Yeah, I needed him.

I needed us.

“No,” was all I said in response. I wanted to ask him if he was going to an AA meeting.

Or a bar.

I hated that that was where my mind went, but the reality was that I just didn’t know. I loved Killian with everything I was, but I didn’t know him anymore.

I didn’t know anything about anything anymore.

I felt my insides stir restlessly as the need to escape became like a living thing beneath my skin.

Walk away first, Zak. Always walk away first or you won’t be able to walk away at all.

My stomach dropped out as the words permeated my brain. It’d been years since I’d last heard them and it was like hearing a ghost.

It pretty much was a ghost.

“Zak?”

I somehow managed to force myself to look at Killian, though I wasn’t sure when I’d looked away from him. It was like time had stopped for a little while.

But it hadn’t because Killian was in the same spot, his probing eyes on me. “Text me if you do,” he finally said.

“I will,” I agreed and forced a small smile to my mouth.

Killian hesitated, then added, “Watch yourself with him.” He motioned in the direction of the guest room. He didn’t wait for me to answer before shutting the door behind him.

I knew he’d head to his truck after letting Nana out, so I got up to go to the door so I could watch for her.

And to watch the man I loved more than life itself walk away.

I knew in my head that he’d be back, but my heart was a whole different story because I didn’t know which version of Killian would walk through the door when he did return.

I had only myself to blame for that.

As I headed for the door, movement to my right caught my attention and I saw Liam leaning against the doorframe between the kitchen and the hall that led to the guest room. My heart jumped in my chest just a bit, but it had nothing to do with fear.

And fuck if that didn’t just break my heart a little more.

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PART II

Liam & Noah

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CHAPTER SEVEN

LIAM

T*hree Years Earlier*

“Hey look, Liam, it’s your new brother, The Creeper.”

“*Stepbrother*,” I automatically corrected as I watched Noah walk slowly across the quad. On his way to the library, no doubt.

Or wherever it was he disappeared to during lunch.

And before school... and after.

I still couldn’t believe The Creeper was now officially related to me.

“Aww, I bet your vows were beautiful,” my friend Jack said as he stared dreamily at the sky and clasped his hands together.

“Fuck off,” I said good-naturedly as I shoved him away from me.

“Has the little queer tried to climb in bed with you?” a friend who was more of a non-friend, Derek, murmured as his eyes followed Noah until he disappeared into the building. The way he’d said “queer” put me on alert. I had a lot of friends, but Derek was one of those guys who you knew hung around you just to be popular by association. I’d grown up with Jack and a couple of other guys and considered them buddies, but Derek had always rubbed me the wrong way, though I’d never tried to oust him from our group. Admittedly, it had kind of turned into a “keep your enemies close” kind of thing with him. Not to mention the heavily built asshole made one hell of a center on my football team, and as quarterback, I’d suffered fewer hits since he’d joined the team. And less hits meant less risk of me getting injured in such a way that a career in the NFL was out of the question. As it was, I only had a few more games to go before the season ended. I’d already been recruited to play for Ohio State when I graduated, so my main

two goals in life these days were to win the championship game against our rival the following month and to do it with as few injuries as possible.

Okay, so technically it was four goals, though the last two were ones I kept to myself, since I wasn't exactly excited at the prospect of anyone knowing my business.

Secret goal number one was to actually graduate.

Which, at the rate I was going, wasn't going to happen. Smarts and athletic prowess may have run in my family, but I'd only inherited the latter, not the former. Fortunately, my father was only concerned with the latter too. But to fulfill his demand that I play professional football, I needed that pesky high school diploma. As successful as Spencer Savage was in the business world, he'd much rather brag to his buddies that his kid was a top pick in the draft, a goal he himself had fallen short of when a knee injury had ended his college career after just three games. Some would say he was vicariously living his life over again through me, but with my father there really wasn't much to the "through" part – he *was* living his life over and he was using me to do it. I lived, breathed, slept, and ate football. When I'd made first the JV team, then the varsity one, I'd told myself I was doing it all to get him off my back. When I'd gotten recruited by Ohio State, I'd promised myself I'd break it to my father that I had no plans of going... that I had another dream I wanted to live for myself.

The reality was that I'd only tried once to tell my father the truth, and I'd been such a coward that I'd gone about it in a roundabout way. When I'd mentioned needing an alternative career in case what had happened to him in college also happened to me, he'd gotten so angry that I'd actually been afraid of him.

That hadn't ever happened before.

Yes, he'd ruled my life with an iron hand... but not a fist.

He hadn't hit me that day either, but something in him had changed and my instinct had been telling me ever since not to press my luck with him. So I'd made myself a new promise... I'd get to college and play the game his way, both literally and figuratively.

I hadn't actually figured out the second part of my new plan yet.

Secret goal number two was just as complicated.

Maybe more so, even.

Secret goal number two was me making sure to keep my hands off my new younger stepbrother, Noah.

I hadn't been sure I was gay until the first time I'd seen the smaller blond boy who always looked down when he walked and never acknowledged all the taunts and barbs thrown his way. It'd been about nine months ago that I'd been sitting in the cafeteria with my buddies when I'd heard muffled voices all around me that had grown louder and louder until I'd been forced to halt the conversation I'd been having with Jack about a play for an upcoming game.

The first thing I'd noticed about the newcomer had been his clothes.

He'd been way too heavily dressed for Southern California in early spring. The then-fifteen-year-old Noah had been wearing a dark green hoodie that was too big for him along with some baggy khaki pants and scuffed-up sneakers. My first thought had been that he looked like the kind of kid who was planning a school shooting or something because he'd been so detached from what was happening around him. He hadn't reacted to any of the whispers or hushed laughs. He'd merely walked to a table that had quickly emptied and had sat down with his book and a little plastic baggie with half a sandwich in it. I'd been surprised to see Derek approach the boy when he'd been heading toward our table with his lunch. He'd bent over Noah and said something to him, then patted him on the back. Noah hadn't moved or reacted to Derek in any kind of way.

Not even to show fear.

Which had likely been his downfall, because Derek was your typical bully... he *thrived* on trying to get his victims to show fear.

I was still ashamed about my lack of action during what had happened next.

Derek had taken the ketchup-covered fries on his tray and dumped them all over Noah's open book. The entire cafeteria had gasped and then a few people had started laughing. Derek had raised his arms like he'd just scored a touchdown, then he'd shoved Noah hard enough to nearly knock him off the bench seat. He'd called him a queer, then had strode over to us like nothing had happened. I'd watched Noah quietly wipe off his book with his arm, smearing the ketchup. When he'd gotten up to leave, I'd seen a slew of pieces of paper taped to his back with various juvenile nicknames on them. A sheet with "Creeper" written in Derek's scratchy writing had been on top of several others.

Teachers had eventually intervened in the weeks that had followed when it had become routine for kids to tape notes to Noah's back. Noah had never

reacted to any of the notes or removed them himself. He'd become a running joke at school because students would often share pictures of him in the background of their selfies or group shots and remark that "The Creeper" had made an appearance.

I, myself, hadn't gotten involved in any of the pranks, but I'd never done anything to stop them until very recently. I'd tried to convince myself that by ignoring the behavior, I was actually helping the situation because kids who foolishly looked up to me might do the same.

I'd been wrong.

Not about the foolishly looking up to me – kids still did that, though I really didn't know why. I supposed they'd all bought into the act that I had some perfect life.

The part I'd been wrong about was that the others mocking Noah would eventually stop.

It hadn't.

Putting aside the fact that I was a degenerate coward for not sticking up for someone who so clearly had needed someone on his side, my strange infatuation with Noah, physically speaking, had me feeling like the biggest fraud on the planet.

Yeah, I'd kind of suspected I was gay since I'd been in my early teens, but I hadn't ever acknowledged it. Not only would it not have fit my image, it would have destroyed my already shaky relationship with my father, and that was something I hadn't been willing to risk. So I'd been a dutiful son and cool kid and had hidden it for all I was worth. I'd even gone so far as to lose my virginity to an older girl when I was fifteen.

I'd been drunker than hell and the whole thing had happened at a college party Jack and I had attended that had taken place at his older brother's fraternity. There'd been several people in the room sucking and fucking one another, and for whatever reason, no one had cared that a few of the couples were same-sex ones. If I hadn't had the pleasurable sight of a guy going down on one guy while being fucked by another to work with, there would have been no way I would have been able to keep it up long enough to fuck the girl whose name, to this day, I couldn't remember.

Jack, who'd missed the whole thing because he'd been passed out in a corner somewhere, had thought I was the coolest guy on the planet. I'd pretended losing my virginity during an orgy had been a dream come true,

but when I'd gotten home that night, I'd cried in my shower as the humiliation and reality had hit me all at once.

But despite the fact that I'd used the sight of men performing sexual acts on one another to find release, I'd still tried to convince myself it was just some weird phase and that my reaction had been fueled by alcohol. I hadn't even considered what it meant that I needed alcohol and that image in my head every time I tried to have sex with the few girlfriends I'd had since that night. Considering how much alcohol I'd consumed in the following two years, it was a miracle that I'd managed to even play football, let alone be a standout star at it.

Once I'd seen Noah for the first time, I'd known that it hadn't had anything to do with alcohol. My body had reacted to him from the moment I'd seen him, and if I hadn't been sitting at that cafeteria table, I probably wouldn't have been able to stand up straight. My erection hadn't lasted once Derek and the other kids' cruelty had started, but it was something that, to this day, I had to fight whenever I was near Noah.

Which hadn't been much.

Until this past weekend when my father had dropped a bomb on me by saying he'd gotten remarried and I had a new little brother.

I ignored Derek's jab about Noah trying to climb in bed with me because not only did I not trust myself not to punch my non-friend until he was out cold, but also because the image of sharing a bed with Noah, of lying on top of him, of covering his mouth with mine, was already causing havoc within my body.

It wasn't until later that night that I allowed myself to indulge in my fantasy. I'd taken to jacking off in the shower in the past few days, since I now shared a wall with the very object of my desire.

Not to mention I had a new stepmother in the house.

The thought of my father now being married to the very woman he'd been cheating on my mother with for years deflated the hard-on I'd been sporting. But the mere idea of Noah sleeping peacefully practically within reaching distance had my hand going for my dick again. Unlike all the times I'd tried to perform in the presence of one of my girlfriends, it took only a few seconds of imagining what Noah's mouth around my cock would feel like to come all over the shower wall. I had to bury my face in my left shoulder and bite down on my upper bicep to stifle my moans.

It took me longer to recover from the orgasm than it probably should have, but instead of heading for my desk so I could try and get through my calculus homework, I went to the kitchen to make myself something to eat. With my father and his new bride celebrating at yet another business associate's house, I knew I wouldn't have to deal with them until the next morning.

Probably not even then, since my father would be at the office working his next deal and my new stepmother would likely be sleeping in before she hit the stores for what would probably be another exhausting day of spending my father's money.

Once I reached the kitchen, I headed for the fridge to see what I could whip up with the limited ingredients we probably had, but I came to a stop when I heard what sounded like crying. It was muffled and barely audible, but I knew the sound well.

My mom had cried a lot toward the end.

I hadn't realized at the time that the tears had been better than none at all in her case. Not until it'd been too late, anyway.

"Dad?" I called in disbelief because my dad just didn't cry. There was no answer. "Marjorie?" I didn't think my stepmother was a crier because she seemed far too shallow, but I'd learned looks could be deceiving. And while I wasn't exactly fond of the woman, I didn't want anything to happen to her.

Maybe she was only now coming to realize what a tyrannical dick she'd tied herself to.

I looked around the darkened room and spotted a shadow in the far corner of the kitchen. The figure was way too small to be my father or Marjorie.

"Noah?" I breathed.

His name sounded foreign on my lips because I hadn't actually ever said it out loud. I hadn't ever *heard* sounds come out of him, either. His silence was something I and the rest of the school had just assumed was related to him being the new kid in class. It hadn't been until nearly a week after he'd arrived that a teacher had inadvertently blurted out to our class that Noah *couldn't* talk. It had been Derek who'd managed to get it out of the teacher by repeatedly asking why the new "freak" and the "creeper" kid didn't have to do a speech like everyone else in our English class. The teacher, presumably in the hopes of creating some sympathy for Noah on behalf of

his classmates, had calmly explained that while Noah hadn't been born mute, he hadn't spoken in many years but that he was still able to participate in class by writing things down.

There'd been no sympathy for Noah... not with dicks like Derek leading the charge. His muteness had only fueled the speculation and rumors about him. Some kids even went out of their way to try and get him to speak by doing things like tripping him in the hallway or throwing things at him. I'd finally had enough of watching the younger boy being tormented a few months ago when I'd walked in on Derek and some other guys from the team ragging on Noah and trying to put his head in the toilet. It was as close to blows as Derek and I had ever come, but fortunately Jack had pulled him from the bathroom. My friend must have seen something in me to know what a rage I'd been in because he'd grabbed Derek by the arm and ordered everyone out. When it'd just been me and Noah, he'd been standing in the corner with a blank look in his eyes. I'd asked him if he was okay, but when he hadn't responded to me, I'd left him alone. My intervention seemed to have been enough to get the kids to back off Noah a bit, though they still taunted him with words or gave him a wide berth whenever he walked past.

Despite what he'd been put through in the bathroom that day, Noah hadn't cried or made a sound, so hearing it now was making me break out in goosebumps. It made him sound so... human.

And broken.

Even though the teacher had mentioned Noah being unable to speak, there'd never been any concrete evidence as to why he couldn't. Speculation, yes. Proof, no.

"Noah," I repeated as I moved closer to him. The only light in the room was the stream from the outside security light that was filtering in through the window. Noah's face was buried in his crossed arms, which were resting on his bent knees. I had no idea what to do, so I just stood there dumbly for a moment. I told myself to leave him be, but I couldn't make my feet move. I could call my father and Marjorie, but I doubted that would benefit Noah. From the little I'd seen of him interacting with Marjorie, their relationship was pretty strained. And my father wasn't exactly sympathetic toward Noah. I'd heard him call him some of the same names that the kids at school had.

“Noah,” I said as I crouched down in front of him. “I know you probably want to be alone right now, but do you mind if I just sit here with you for a bit? I, um...”

I found myself at a loss for words and ended up settling on what I was actually feeling instead of saying what I thought he wanted to hear. “My mom... she got really sad one day, but she did that a lot, so I thought it was the same as all the other times and she’d snap out of it. But she didn’t and then it was too late and I just... I just think I want to sit here with you for a little while, okay?”

God, could I have sounded any lamer? It was a non-explanatory explanation.

Noah didn’t react in any kind of way. He just continued to cry. I sat down in front of him and waited, but when the sobs seemed to get worse, not better, I found my body and my mind at war. My mind said to back off and leave him be... to not get too attached or invested in this strange, sweet, beautiful boy who didn’t speak. But my heart wasn’t having any of that argument and before I even knew what I was doing, I was sliding my body next to his so that we were sitting side by side. My arm was moving on its own as it settled around his shoulders. The soft murmurs coming from my mouth didn’t seem like actual words, but I kept saying them as I began rubbing his back. It seemed like hours went by before he reacted in any kind of way.

When he did, it wasn’t by slowing his sobs or trying to move away from my touch.

Instead, he suddenly turned into me and put his head against my chest. His arm went around my body as he half-hugged me. His cries racked his body over and over, so I just held him as tight as I could.

“Shhh, it’s okay, Noah, I have you. Everything will be all right.”

He didn’t respond, but I did notice the book in his hands. The one he carried everywhere with him. Upon closer inspection, I realized it wasn’t a book at all, but a journal of some kind.

It was a good five minutes before he settled in my hold. When he finally did, he just stayed there, breathing heavily.

“Noah, can you tell me what happened?” I asked, then shook my head when I heard my own words. “I mean, can you write it down for me?”

He didn’t answer me in any meaningful way at first, but when he did, it was nothing but disappointing.

Because he pulled free of me.

And I'd *really* been enjoying holding him.

"Is that your journal?" I asked. "I mean, do you write in it?"

I was stunned when he shook his head. Tears began slipping down his cheeks. He wiped at them halfheartedly.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

I stopped abruptly when I saw a piece of paper sitting next to him. I reached for it and realized it was an old, worn-looking piece of lined paper that had been torn in half. My eyes went directly to the last words on the page and I felt my heart squeeze painfully in my chest.

I became a father today. My son, Noah, is finally here and he's the most perfect thing I've ever seen.

"Noah," I breathed as I realized who the journal likely belonged to.

Noah slowly turned to look at me, then saw the piece of paper in my hand. He took it carefully from me and then lovingly opened the journal. I was horrified to see that many of the pages in the book had been torn. There were a few photos stuck between some of the pages, but I couldn't tell if they were ripped too. Noah went to a page in the beginning of the journal... one that looked like it belonged to the torn piece. Noah tried to position the piece of paper so that it was once again whole, but of course, it wouldn't stay in place. He let out a choked little cry. The sight of the faded, red stain from when Derek had dumped ketchup on the journal threw me into a rage.

"Did Derek do this?" I asked. "Did he rip the pages?"

I wasn't really expecting an answer, but when Noah slowly turned his head to look at me with wet, emerald eyes, I held my breath. I felt like he'd closed his very fingers around my lungs and squeezed.

The words that I thought he was going to speak didn't come, but when he held my gaze and slowly shook his head, I felt a mix of hot and cold go through me. I was still pissed that someone had torn his dad's journal, but the knowledge that he was "talking" to me had put me on cloud nine.

Noah pointed at himself.

"You did it?" I asked.

He hesitated, then nodded. I was about to ask him why when more tears ghosted down his cheeks and he looked at the torn page again.

I realized it didn't matter why he'd done it. My relationship with my own father was fucked up but I still idolized the ground he walked on. He

was my father, I was his son... no further explanation required. Family could bring out the best, and worst, in all of us.

The sight of Noah so brokenhearted over something that clearly meant the world to him tore me up inside. "Please don't cry, Noah," I whispered desperately. That high feeling of him actually communicating with me was gone and all I felt was this intense need to make it so he never shed another tear again.

I reached out to touch the pages of the journal with my free hand while I started rubbing his back with the other. "I'll fix it, Noah," I murmured. I ended up pulling him against my chest again. "We're family now, and family takes care of each other, right?"

He nodded against me. The feel of his cheek against my body and the way his arm curled trustingly around me messed with all my senses and it was all I could do not to drop a kiss to the back of his neck. I put my fingers in that exact spot instead and began kneading his soft skin. "Brothers," I blurted out because I needed to remind myself that this moment was about giving Noah the comfort he needed and nothing more. Even on the off chance he wasn't straight, I wouldn't do anything to fracture the trust he was showing me. He was young and vulnerable, and he needed someone to look out for him.

"I'm your big brother now, all right, Noah?" I repeated as I tightened my grip on him. "I'm going to take care of everything now, okay?" When he didn't respond, I rubbed that spot where his hair met the back of his neck and whispered, "You believe me, right, Noah?"

It wasn't until he nodded his head again that part of my life seemed to right itself and I once again felt something I hadn't in a really long time.

Whole.

CHAPTER EIGHT

NOAH

P*resent Day*

I sat up when I heard the door creak open and immediately regretted it because my body screamed in protest. But I managed to stay upright as Liam quickly got the door shut behind him.

“Fuck, no lock,” he muttered as he studied the doorknob. He looked around the room and then hurried to the bed and placed the bottle of water and medication he’d gone looking for on it. I wasn’t surprised when he went for the dresser next to the door and began sliding it across the floor. The scraping sound the big piece of furniture made on the wood floor made my head hurt, but I didn’t manage to relax until the dresser was in front of the door, preventing anyone from entering the room.

Well, they’d probably be able to enter the room if they used a little bit of force, but at least we’d hear it.

I should have thought of it myself when the man, Zak, had brought me to his house, but I’d been too stressed and scared to do much of anything. And admittedly, there’d been a little part of me that had maybe trusted Zak a tiny bit.

The older man talked to me like Liam did.

Like I was normal.

Not some freak.

“There,” Liam said as he made his way back to the bed. My insides tightened when I saw how badly he was still limping as well as holding his side where he’d been kicked over and over. I’d watched the entire attack happen from just a few feet away and hadn’t been able to do a thing about it.

I hadn't even been able to call for help.

The attack had been my fault and I'd just stood there silently crying as I'd watched my brother fight to save us both.

Not really your brother, my inner voice reminded me.

I was both glad for that voice and kind of hated it a little too. I didn't even know if it was my own voice because I didn't remember what mine sounded like.

The voice reminding me that Liam wasn't my actual brother helped alleviate the guilt associated with some of the things I thought about him sometimes.

Like how good his weight felt on those rare occasions where he'd end up falling asleep on my body rather than me on him.

Or like how I craved his touch at times when I didn't necessarily need comfort.

Or like how my body burned whenever he was near me and I found it hard to breathe.

But the guilt that came with wanting things from my brother that I shouldn't also helped make it a little easier to control my reactions to his touch and his words. It was the mother of Catch-22s.

"Here, take your medicine and drink some water," Liam said as he came to sit down on the bed next to me. I was under the covers, he was sitting on top of them. But the sensation of his hip brushing mine as he turned toward me wasn't dulled by the fabric separating us.

Liam handed me the pills, which I took without question, since I knew Liam would make sure they weren't anything that could cause me harm. I wanted to cry at the relief that Liam was back at my side again, watching out for me.

"We're just going to rest here for the night and then head out in the morning, okay? I'll find us a place where you can get better, but it can't be here. I don't trust these guys."

I nodded, even though it wasn't really what I wanted to say. While I felt like shit and doubted I'd feel any better tomorrow, I was more worried about Liam. When Zak had driven me to his house, he'd talked about Liam's injuries, mostly to reassure me he'd be fine. But I'd also heard the concern in his voice, so I'd known he was leaving things out.

And Liam had been unconscious for so long...

I pointed at his face, then his head.

“I’m fine,” Liam quickly reassured me, though I didn’t miss his wince when he shook his head just a bit too vehemently. “Promise,” he added with a small smile.

It wasn’t his real smile. I hadn’t really seen that since we’d left home. Sometimes he came close to being the old Liam when he started talking about our new life waiting for us in Vermont, but those conversations were happening less and less now.

Too much had happened.

Mostly to Liam ...but because of me.

“Scoot over,” Liam said softly as he stood up. Butterflies danced in my belly like they always did as I pulled back the covers and moved over on the bed. The mattress dipped beneath Liam’s weight. Once he was settled and we were facing each other, his arms reached for me. I put out one hand to stop him and then pointed to my mouth, then him. When he looked at me in confusion, I coughed lightly into my hand and then pointed at him.

“I won’t get sick,” he said almost defiantly, then he was pulling me forward and wrapping his arms around me.

His statement was ridiculous but so very *Liam*. He was the strongest person I’d ever known.

And the most stubborn.

Everything that had happened in the past six months had been because of me. Liam could have and should have walked away from me a long time ago, but he hadn’t. Even if he wouldn’t have been able to go back home, he would have been able to carve out a new life for himself because he was that driven and smart. But I was an anchor around his neck, dragging him down to the darkest of depths, and I wasn’t strong enough to cut him loose. The one time I’d tried hadn’t gone well for either of us... the proof of that was written all over Liam’s face and body.

“Are you cold?” Liam asked as shivers that had nothing to do with being sick tore through my entire body. Before I could respond either way, Liam pulled me closer to him and wrapped the blanket tighter around us. “Sleep, Noah,” he whispered against the top of my head. I swore I felt him press a kiss there, but I couldn’t be sure. “I’ll keep you safe,” Liam added. I could hear his voice growing heavier, and I knew he’d fight his exhaustion just so he could keep his promise to me. I was careful not to put too much pressure on his ribs as I pressed my fingers into his back and tucked my head under his chin.

Liam was a good four inches taller than me, if not more. I barely met his shoulder when we were standing side by side. I'd always hated being small, but somehow my body seemed to fit against Liam's perfectly when we slept like this. But months of spending each night in such an intimate embrace also made it clearer to me how much Liam had changed physically since we'd left home. His once muscular body was growing thinner every week and his skin looked haggard and pale. His light brown hair no longer had the soft sheen it'd once had and was looking shaggier and shaggier every day. I knew it wasn't just the elements that were wearing Liam down... it was the lack of food and the things he had to do to get said food that were slowly killing him. I should have been in the same condition as him, but Liam wasn't letting it happen. Every extra bit of food he got came to me and he adamantly refused to share it, always saying I should eat it because he'd get more. It was always Liam's back to the wind when we slept and his jacket covering *my* head when it rained.

There wasn't much I could give Liam, so it was moments like this that I tried to be the person Liam deserved. I listened to his heart beating beneath my ear and relished the sensation of his breath skating over the back of my neck. I held as still as I could so I wouldn't disturb him, but it wasn't easy considering my body was reacting like it always did when Liam was so close. At least there wasn't an erection to worry about. That part of my body hadn't worked in quite a while, not even around Liam anymore. But all the other signals that I was lusting after my older stepbrother were still there. Thankfully, Liam hadn't ever seemed to notice.

I knew Liam didn't view me as a freak like everyone else did, but it was what I was. Even if I'd dressed in cooler clothes and hadn't spent so much time with my nose in a book or my dad's journal, the whole not-talking thing was pretty much going to fuck up my "normal" factor, no matter what. Liam had only asked me about it once about a year after he'd declared himself my big brother. The words I'd wanted to respond with had been there, but they'd been locked in a part of my brain that I couldn't reach. I could see the words, but I didn't know how to get them to my mouth. It was like someone threw up a roadblock in my mind every time I tried, and no matter how many different routes I took, there was always some wall I couldn't get past. The cruelest part was probably the fact that I also couldn't write the words down, so I couldn't explain to Liam why I wasn't able to speak to him.

Liam had always said he understood and none of it mattered, but he'd seen me be able to write down things like answers to homework. Hell, I'd even helped him with *his* homework so he'd get his diploma. But any time I tried to write something about me, something that was more intimate, the roadblocks went up left and right and I was left feeling utterly helpless. Liam saw it as some signal that I didn't fully trust him, but I did. My inability to tell him so frustrated him as much as it did me.

I couldn't even say his fucking name.

I couldn't even give him *that*.

Liam's arms relaxed around me just a bit and I sighed in relief, knowing he was asleep. I was exhausted myself, but it wasn't often that I had moments like these to just take in my fill of Liam. To feel like I was taking care of him for once.

I let my fingers graze his shoulder blades, then his spine. Liam let out a breath and began shifting his body. I moved to the position I knew he wanted, and when it was his arms around me and his head on my chest, I cradled his head in my hands and placed a whisper of a kiss on his temple.

"Noah," he mumbled, then he snuggled deeper into me.

I spoke his name silently in my head in response, then closed my eyes and tried to get just the first syllable to pass my lips. The second I did, everything went dark and I felt the fear tripping through me. I quickly opened my eyes and searched the room to make sure it was still just me and Liam. I froze when I realized we *weren't* alone.

The bird.

I'd forgotten about the strange little bird. I wasn't sure where it had been while Liam had gone to get some water, but now the thing was slowly walking across the room and poking its beak at the floor every now and again. When it reached the short piece of carpet that was next to the bed, it hesitated, then looked up at me.

Waldo.

Its name was Waldo. He seemed to belong to the bigger guy... Killian.

Killian scared me.

A lot more than Zak did.

Which was strange because they weren't all that different looking. Killian was a little heavier and had a lot more tattoos as well as a pierced nose, but Zak had his fair share of muscles and he wore these small little silver hoops in his ears. But even though he looked like he could hold his

own in a fight, Zak had a certain softness about him... a gentleness. I'd seen that with Killian too when he'd handled Waldo, but I doubted he was like that with just anyone.

I understood that the two men, who appeared to be around thirty or so, lived together and were in a relationship, but I couldn't really make sense of what kind of relationship it was exactly. The way the men looked at each other made it clear that the feelings between them were intense, but there was a distance there too...

A small thumping sound had me looking down at Waldo again. He'd moved to the base of the nightstand and was pecking at the wood. After a second, he looked up at me, then he started pecking at the nightstand again. I felt myself smiling at his antics because I was pretty sure I knew what he wanted.

Luckily, Liam and I were lying pretty close to the edge of the bed, so I didn't have to move much to reach the bird. I extended my arm. I hadn't ever had any pets because Aunt Marjorie had claimed to be allergic to everything, and the same roadblocks that kept me from speaking also kept me from remembering much about my childhood. So there was no way to know if I'd had pets when I'd been little, either.

The clothes I'd been given at the hospital included a scrub top that was short-sleeved, but I also had on a long-sleeved shirt underneath, which I was glad for when Waldo used his claws and beak to make his way up my arm. I could see from the way one of the bird's wings was resting that there was something wrong with it, so I figured that meant he probably couldn't fly. I kept one arm around Liam as Waldo balanced on my other arm. I wasn't really sure what to do with him, but the toucan made the decision for himself when he jumped off my arm and onto the bed. I watched as he slowly walk-hopped to the end and then positioned himself on the top of the footrail. His eyes stayed trained on the door.

I put my arm back around Liam and watched our little sentry for a while before my eyes grew heavy. My body ached, and I felt both hot and cold.

Zak was right.

I likely had the flu.

But I wouldn't let that mess up Liam's plans for us to leave in the morning. If he thought we weren't safe here, then he was probably right.

That was the last thought I had before sleep finally claimed me.

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CHAPTER NINE

LIAM

God, it was so fucking nice to be warm for once.
Even if everything hurt like a son of a bitch.
Pain and warmth were a whole lot better than pain and cold... and wet... and dark.

I'd never been a fan of the dark... I'd watched too many scary movies as a kid, I supposed. But if the past six months had taught me anything, scary shit happened whether it was light or dark outside, and the truest evils lurked in the most innocent-looking of places.

Even one's own bedroom.

I jolted awake as the memory came rushing back like a freight train. "Noah!" I gasped as I frantically began looking for him. I could hear him sobbing, but he couldn't call out for me.

"Hey," a heavy voice said and then I was being held down. The pain that raced up my side almost had me passing out, but I didn't care.

I needed to get to Noah.

"Damn it, Liam, open your eyes!"

Open my eyes? What the hell? They *were* open! I could clearly see my room and the figures on the—

"Open your fucking eyes, Liam! Now!"

This time I opened my eyes and woke up for real. It wasn't that dream within a dream thing – or nightmare, in my case – anymore.

But I was immediately thrust into a whole other nightmare.

Because leaning over me and pinning me down was the fucker from the day before... the one who'd upset Noah. I opened my mouth to tell him to

let me the fuck go when he ground out, “Look to your right! He’s here. He’s safe.”

Something about his demand had me shivering, and I felt compelled to follow the whispered order. I let out a rush of air when I saw that Noah was asleep next to me.

And was that... a *horse* next to him?

“Jesus Christ, am I still dreaming?” I asked. Maybe I was still in the hospital and on some really amazing drugs. That would explain the pinch I could feel along the back of my hand.

It took about five long seconds for reality to settle in.

That pinch *was* the same as when I’d woken up in the hospital the previous day... right before I’d ripped the offending needle out of my skin, not caring about the blood that had dripped everywhere as I’d torn my own flesh in the process.

“What the fuck?” I gasped as I saw that the IV was once again placed on the back of my hand, though it was on the opposite one this time. I tried to reach for it, but the big fucker, Killian, was still holding me down, though he was doing it by my upper arms. I shot a look at Noah and was horrified to see that he had an IV too.

I opened my mouth to yell at Noah to wake up as I began trying to kick at Killian, but one of his heavy hands slapped over my mouth. I grabbed his wrist with my free hand, but I wasn’t strong enough to get him to release his hold on me.

“It’s just fluids,” Killian said as his dark eyes bored into mine. “If you promise to hold still, I’ll take yours out.”

Who was he fucking kidding? I was going to rip him apart the second I had use of both my hands.

Okay, yeah, so he’d probably be able to kick my ass in about a minute flat, but I could buy Noah enough time to run for it.

Killian must have sensed or seen something in my expression because he sighed. I expected him to say something, but instead, he used the hand he was holding my arm down with to grab my wrist. Electricity shot up my arm from where he was touching me. I was so caught off guard by the sensation that I didn’t struggle when he moved my hand... the one without the IV in it. My skin came into contact with something hot and dry.

Noah.

It was Noah’s arm.

“Feel how warm he is. He’s been tossing and turning all night,” Killian said. “He finally fell asleep about an hour ago. Do you really want to wake him up again?”

I managed to shift my eyes to Noah. He was facing me. His skin looked flushed and I could see a little bit of sweat on his brow. He was clearly sick, but he looked comfortable for the moment because his hand with the IV was tucked up under his cheek.

“Zak put the IVs in both of you just to give you guys some fluids because you’ve been asleep for a while. You woke up while he was inserting the needle and we told you then the same thing that I’m telling you now - there aren’t any kind of drugs in the IV bag.”

Yeah, right, like I fucking believed that. And why couldn’t I remember waking up when they’d put the thing in?

I might as well have said the words out loud because Killian added, “Just take stock of how you feel, Liam. Do you feel good?”

Hell no, I felt like shit. I hurt all over and—

“Asshole,” I mumbled quietly against his hand as I realized I was feeling too much pain for any kind of drugs to be in my system. He actually seemed to smile briefly like he could hear how I’d said the word.

“Let your brother sleep, Liam. He needs it.”

I looked at Noah again, though I didn’t really have to. I knew Noah needed more rest than he got. Just like I knew he needed more food, more warmth, more security.

I slowly nodded my head. Killian instantly removed his hand.

“Hold still,” he said softly as he took my hand in his and looked at the IV. “I’ve had Zak do this to me a few times and he told me what to do when I took it out, but if you squirm, I can guarantee it’s not going to be pretty.”

His growly voice did very unwelcome things to my body.

“Just hurry the fuck up then,” I snapped, keeping my voice low.

Killian’s eyes slid to mine, but I couldn’t read his expression. But hell if my dick didn’t kind of like the unreadable look.

Jesus, what was wrong with me? Every part of my body felt like I’d been run over by a Mack truck and yet my cock could still find the energy to respond to a somewhat hot guy?

Okay, fine, *really* hot guy.

To cover up my untimely reaction, I blurted, “Why the hell is there a horse in bed with my brother?”

Killian didn't even look up at me as he nonchalantly answered, "Because that's where she wanted to be."

"Dude, seriously?"

"Yeah, *dude*," Killian murmured.

I couldn't help but wince when he removed the needle and then applied pressure to my hand with a piece of gauze. He used his mouth to tear open the square wrapper that I figured held some kind of bandage in it. I wanted to make a snide remark about how that probably wasn't the most sterile of techniques to get the thing open, but when my gaze landed on his lips, my words got stuck around my suddenly thick tongue.

I quickly dropped my eyes, but only so far as to stare at Killian's Adam's apple.

Definitely not a safe zone.

I lifted my eyes thinking maybe just staring him down would do the trick, but he was focused on covering my hand with the bandage.

And that was when I saw the little hoop in his nose.

Jesus, was there no place to look on the guy that wouldn't have my dick thanking me?

"Did you say something?" Killian asked as he shifted his eyes to mine.

Holy hell, had I said any part of that previous thought out loud?

"Yeah, I asked if it was possible for you to go any slower, Grandpa."

Killian's eyes hardened. He still had my hand in his and I could feel the strength in his fingers. The damage he could do to me with them...

Or to someone else who even looked at *me* wrong.

What the fuck?

WHAT?

THE?

FUCK?

Where the hell had *that* thought come from?

I yanked my hand from Killian's and turned away from him so I could pretend to check on Noah. I felt his forehead and immediately felt guilty that I'd even been focused on anything besides him.

"What's his temperature? Is he in any danger?" I heard myself asking as I caressed Noah's cheek. He immediately snuggled closer to me.

Killian didn't answer me, so I turned my head to look at him. I was surprised to see him watching me and Noah with a strange expression. When he realized I was looking at him, he said, "Your brother is—"

“Stepbrother,” I interjected, though I had no idea why. Maybe because I was worried about that expression Killian had on his face as he’d watched us.

Like he’d known something he shouldn’t about what my touch really meant.

If anything, I *shouldn’t* have corrected him. But the idea of him thinking Noah and I were true brothers didn’t sit well with me for some reason.

“What?” Killian asked in surprise.

“He’s my stepbrother. My father married his aunt.” I turned to look back at Noah and forced myself to stop touching him. I’d already stirred up too much suspicion as it was. “I’m not sure if that makes him my stepbrother or not...”

God, Liam, shut the fuck up.

“It makes him whatever you guys want to be to one another,” Killian responded softly. I managed not to look at the man this time. He was still sitting on the bed next to my hip. I could practically feel his heat through the blanket.

“Noah’s temperature has gone down from its highest, which was about 103 this morning. His IV only contains fluid, just like yours. We tried to have him take some ibuprofen throughout the night, but he refused. He didn’t fight the IV this morning... he was too tired, I guess.”

Guilt went through me as I realized I’d slept through it all. The men could have done anything they wanted to Noah and I wouldn’t have been able to stop it. I wondered if he’d tried to wake me up at some point—

“Wait,” I said as I quickly looked at the door. The dresser was back in its original position. I was almost certain I hadn’t dreamed the part about moving it the day before. “How did you get in here? I blocked the door.”

“Closet,” Killian said as he motioned over his shoulder at what looked like a normal closet door. “The farmer who built this place was part of the underground railroad. He built corridors behind the walls so the slaves he was helping could easily escape their rooms if authorities came knocking... the passages converge beneath the house and lead to the barn. When you guys didn’t respond to us calling you through the door, we started to worry about you.” Killian shrugged and then climbed to his feet. “Zak left you some soup,” he said. “You should try to eat some of it.”

He picked up what looked like a Thermos from the nightstand and uncapped it, then poured some broth into the top of the container.

I shook my head. I wasn't about to take anything else from these guys. I had no clue what they were up to, but I needed to keep my wits about me. I'd learned the hard way why the saying "if it seems too good to be true, it probably is" existed.

"Suit yourself," Killian said. "Zak will be back in a couple of hours, so he can put the IV back in then. Or he'll wait until you're out cold to do it."

"Is that really all you've got?" I asked as he made a move to turn away. "A big, scary guy like yourself and you're trying to use reverse psychology on me?"

"I'm just stating facts, kid," Killian said as he went to sit in an easy chair that had clearly been pulled closer to the bed so that it was only a few feet away. He picked up a notepad and started sketching something. "Whatever life you two have been living is catching up with you every minute of every day. You so more than him," Killian said as he nodded in Noah's direction. "Zak's going to do his best not to let that happen because that's who he is. He'll fight for you and your stepbrother for as long as you let him."

"And you?" I heard myself asking.

"I'm not Zak," he said as he studied whatever he'd drawn. I saw his eyes shift in the direction of the foot of the bed. The strange-looking black bird with the orange beak was sitting on the footrail, staring at me and Noah.

"What does that mean?" I asked as I kept my eyes on the bird. I couldn't put my finger on what looked off about it, besides the fact that it was clearly an exotic bird that was currently watching me and Noah like we were its chicks or something.

When Killian didn't answer me, I shifted my gaze to him. He was watching me intently, and I felt that shiver of awareness go through me again. "Drink the soup, Liam," he said softly.

Almost gently.

It was an order, but it also wasn't.

It was a request... but it also wasn't.

God, had the fuckers who'd beaten the shit out of me kicked all my common sense out of me in the process?

I found myself reaching for the soup. I told myself it was because it was the smart thing to do and not because I had this strange need to please him.

I carefully eased myself up so I was in a sitting position. I put one hand on Noah's back when he stirred a little. He immediately ended up sidled up against my hip, his arm around my waist. Thank God the blanket was a heavy one or Killian would have seen my body's reaction to the close contact. My only reprieve was that my body was too pained and exhausted to torture me with a full hard-on like it usually did when Noah was clinging to me.

I didn't look at the soup before I took a sip... and nearly gagged.

"Holy shit, it's—"

I chose that moment to look up at Killian and saw him looking at me questioningly.

And with a hint of warning.

"Delicious," I croaked as I tried to get past the salt that still seemed to be coating my tongue. There were a host of other spices in the soup that didn't belong there.

I swore I saw Killian smile as he looked down at his sketch again. "Zak likes to be creative when it comes to cooking."

"Very *creative*," I acknowledged, then spied a bottle of water on the nightstand. I reached for it and took a long drink, then began pouring some of the water into the cup in the hopes of diluting the weird flavor. "Too hot," I lied when I saw Killian watching me. That strange, off-kilter feeling went through me as he studied me. It was similar to what I'd felt when Zak had forced me down on the bed in the hospital after I'd taken a swing at him. I'd been nearly frantic with worry for Noah, but I'd still been so very aware of Zak's weight pinning me down.

"There's a bottle of ibuprofen on the nightstand," Killian said. "It's unopened so you can see we didn't mess with it."

My gut instinct was to decline the medication, but my body was hurting too much to give in to my need to show Killian how tough I was and that I didn't need any drugs to feel better. The reality was that I was useless to Noah at the moment. As much as I hated it, I needed what the men were offering. The quicker I got my strength back, the sooner I could take care of Noah.

"When can he travel?" I asked.

"You'll have to ask Zak," Killian responded. Definitely no reverse psychology there. Part of me wondered if I asked the guy to give me and Noah a ride somewhere, would he do it just to be rid of us?

Which didn't really jive with how he'd treated us so far. He'd been careful about taking my IV out and he hadn't wanted Noah to wake up after a sleepless night...

I took a few more sips of the soup and then put it down. Killian's presence was incredibly unnerving, even though he wasn't even looking at me. His gaze would occasionally shift to the bird, but that was it.

Besides the black bird, there were multiple dogs and cats in the room. A big black lab was lying at Killian's feet and there was a cat on the top of the chair just behind his shoulder.

"You and your husband run a zoo or something?" I muttered.

"Or something," Killian responded, not even looking up for a second at me. That kind of bothered me, but I didn't know why. The guy was a dick and the last thing I wanted was his attention on me.

Then why the fuck was I still talking to him?

"And Zak and I aren't married."

"But you're—?" I began, then snapped my mouth shut as I realized how inappropriate it was to make assumptions about the men's relationship.

Killian actually did look up at me then, his eyes sharp. "Yeah, we are." I couldn't help but feel like there was some kind of silent warning there.

"Hey, man," I said as I raised my hand. "Even if I did swing that way, Nurse Man wouldn't be my type."

Jesus, why couldn't I just shut the fuck up? And why the hell was I lying about my sexuality? Or even talking about it to begin with?

Again, *why the fuck was I still talking to him?*

I promised myself to sit there and silently sip the shitty soup, but the more Killian ignored me, the more restless I became. What the fuck was he waiting for? Not only did he make me feel jumpy, my body had decided to remind me at that exact moment that all the fluids that IV bag had pumped into me needed to come back out.

Right now.

"Dude, you can go."

When Killian didn't respond, I added, "I won't block the door again."

That was a lie because I had every intention of blocking the door, as well as finding the secret door in the closet and barring that one too somehow. But no way I wanted him to know that. The guy and his partner were being a little too nice for my comfort. I didn't want to risk falling asleep again and leaving Noah unguarded.

And besides my impatient bladder, the rest of my body felt heavy with the weight of exhaustion settling over it.

"I don't give a shit if you block the door, kid. It's a dresser, not a safe," Killian responded dryly as he kept sketching. "We just didn't want to scratch our floors by pushing the door open with it sitting in front of it."

It irked me that he kept calling me "kid," but it was another one of those things I just couldn't figure out.

Maybe because I'd stopped being a kid the second I'd walked into my room that fateful day and realized that monsters could masquerade themselves as idols. Or maybe it'd been the first time I'd realized the lengths I'd have to go to in order to keep myself and Noah alive.

"You already know I'm not going to try and take Noah out of here while he's sick," I said, my anger growing.

"Yep," was all I got back.

"Then what the fuck do you want?" I asked.

Killian actually leaned back in the chair and put the ankle of his right leg up on the knee of his left. He was settling in.

Getting comfortable.

"Go take your piss, Liam. There's no waterproof pad on that mattress." He had the nerve to glance up at me. "Take a shower, too. You're pretty ripe."

"Fuck you," I bit out.

Killian actually chuckled.

"What?" I groused when he didn't say anything. He just sat there like he didn't have a care in the world.

"I *do* swing *that* way," he drawled as his pencil moved over the page in front of him. "But *you* most definitely aren't my type."

"Why not?" I blurted before I could stop myself.

"Well, for starters, I don't fuck kids."

"I'm twenty-one, asshole."

Another chuckle that grated on my nerves. "Go shower. I'll keep an eye on Noah."

"No way, not happening," I said.

"Suit yourself," Killian responded, unfazed. He didn't move.

I lasted for a full minute before I felt like I was going to burst at the seams. "You're a dick," I snapped as I climbed out of bed... and nearly fell to my knees.

“Whoa, hey,” Killian said as he managed to lunge from the chair and catch me before I landed in a heap on the floor. As it was, I banged one knee pretty hard and couldn’t stop the moan of pain that burst out of me.

“Hang on, I’ve got you,” Killian said as he eased his arm around me. I tried to pull away from him and curse him out at the same time because I was sure this was somehow all his fault, but the pain and humiliation were too intense.

He started to sit me down on the bed, but I shook my head almost rabidly. As much as I hurt, there was still one pressing need that I couldn’t ignore. “Bathroom,” I croaked.

I leaned on him far more than I would have liked as the bigger man practically carried me across the room to the attached bathroom. When I saw the toilet, I wanted to weep for joy.

“Okay, I’m good,” I managed to grind out as I tried to breathe through the pain that lingered in my side.

“Sure you are, kid,” Killian said.

Horror went through me as he led me to the toilet.

I couldn’t.

I just *couldn’t*.

Despite all of the shameful things I’d done in the past six months, I just couldn’t suffer through this final humiliation.

“Killian, no,” I whispered when he lifted the toilet lid up. “Please,” I added as I could feel tears threatening to fall. I hadn’t ever cried in front of anyone else, not since my mother died, but I was so close to losing it that begging seemed like the less humiliating option.

And all because I didn’t want the man to have to undress me and help me stand there so I could piss.

I didn’t dare look at Killian as he stiffened next to me. I waited for him to say something about how I was being stupid and he didn’t give a shit about seeing my dick, but to my surprise, he turned me away from the toilet.

“Here,” he said as he snatched a towel from a cabinet between the shower and the dresser. I watched in disbelief as he wrapped it around my waist. “Hold it closed,” Killian said as his eyes met mine.

I didn’t see even an ounce of judgement.

I had to look away so I could blink rapidly enough to try and stem the tears of relief.

“If I steady you, do you think you can work the scrubs over your hips?” he asked.

I nodded before I even considered whether or not I could.

“Okay,” Killian said with a quick jerk of his head. One hand settled on my upper arm and the other rested on my waist outside the towel. I sucked in a breath as I reached down and fumbled to get my hand beneath the towel and find the waistband of the scrub pants. I whimpered when my body protested the move.

Why the hell was I in so much pain all of a sudden? It hadn’t been this bad when I’d woken up in the hospital.

Because you were still on drugs, you idiot.

“That’s it, kid, you’re doing good,” Killian said. I was leaning heavily against his chest and his arms had moved around my shoulders and my waist to keep me upright. I wanted to laugh as I wondered how exactly this was any better than the humiliation of him helping me take my pants down.

So much for my last few shreds of pride.

I pushed the waistband down enough to clear my right hip and ended up closing my eyes as pain shot through me. I must have made a sound because Killian’s hand settled on the back of my head. “You’re almost there, Liam.”

I nodded and pressed my forehead against his shoulder. I switched hands and got the other side of the waistband down. I felt completely worn out from the tiny bit of exertion.

“Killian?”

“Help me with him,” I heard Killian say, then there was another pair of hands on me.

“Let’s find him something to use as a urinal,” I heard Zak say. I was still leaning against Killian. I tried to shake my head.

“No, he’s okay,” Killian said firmly.

Some kind of silent communication must have happened between the two men because a moment later they were working together to sit me down on the toilet. One of them had pulled my pants the rest of the way down while the other had kept the towel in place the entire time.

The second my ass hit the porcelain, I let go and felt a shiver of relief go through me as my thankful bladder did its duty.

I heard the men talking quietly to each other, but I was too tired to listen to what they had to say. Whatever adrenaline rush I’d been feeling when I’d

first woken up was starting to wear off fast and hard, and it was all I could do not to fall asleep right there on the toilet.

“He won’t be able to stand by himself in the shower, babe,” I heard Zak say.

“What about the tub?” was Killian’s response.

“It’s probably not a good idea.”

“Wouldn’t it help with some of the pain he’s feeling?”

“Yes,” I cut in as I forced my eyes to open. “Yes, please, I... I just... yes,” I choked out. I was still peeing but I was so much more comfortable that I didn’t really care when Zak knelt in front of me. His fingers brushed the hair back from my temple.

“Are you sure, Liam?” he said. “Killian and I will need to get you in the tub and one of us is going to need to stay in the room with you to keep an eye on you.”

I nodded. “Too ripe,” I said tiredly.

Zak shot Killian a glance, but the other man quickly made himself look busy by turning toward the tub and getting it going.

“We’ll keep the towel on you, okay?” Zak offered.

I nodded, grateful beyond words. The man was a nurse, for God’s sake. Chances were, he’d seen me naked at the hospital.

So why did the idea of him seeing me naked now fill me with such dread?

Okay, so I didn’t look the same as I had six months ago. What the hell did that matter? If these two guys wanted to take advantage of me, they could do it any time they wanted. Unlike the other times it’d happened, I didn’t have the strength to fight back.

I wasn’t sure how long I sat there for, but I was pretty sure I’d dozed off because when a hand settled on my shoulder and I opened my eyes, I could see that the bathtub was full.

And I was blessedly empty.

I was also shirtless. My pants, which had been around my ankles, were gone too. I didn’t even remember when they’d been removed... or which of the men had done it.

It was Killian who eased his arms around me to lift me to my feet. The towel stayed in place around my hips because Zak was holding onto it. I was dimly aware of all the bruises covering my body. Some were fresh,

others were older. Even if I hadn't looked so haggard and skinny, not a thing about me would have been appealing to the two good-looking men.

Especially when they had each other.

I was glad my body was too tired to respond because the image of Killian and Zak in an intimate embrace was just a little too real in my head at the moment.

But that image took a back seat when I suddenly somehow ended up between the two men. Killian was at my front and Zak was at my back.

They were both big and warm and their bodies felt so strong and hard. They were talking to each other about the best way to get me into the tub, but I barely heard their words. I was too busy luxuriating in what it felt like to be pressed between them.

I had no clue how much time went by before I was eased into the warm water. Zak kept the towel around me all the way up until my body disappeared between a flurry of bath bubbles.

"Hold on to the sides if you need to," Zak said to me as he took one of my hands and placed it on the edge of the tub. I figured he didn't want me to sink beneath the luxurious water. I managed a nod because I was too tired to do much of anything else.

"I'll go check on Noah," I heard Killian say. He sounded kind of tense, but I wasn't completely certain.

I was just in the process of nodding off a minute later when I heard Zak say, "Liam, I need you to stay awake for me a bit longer, okay?"

I might have nodded.

I wasn't sure.

"How about we wash your hair?"

That sounded like a mix of heaven and hell. On the one hand, I didn't want to move, but on the other, I couldn't remember the last time I'd washed my hair.

"Can't. Too tired," I admitted.

"Just hold on to the edges of the tub and sit forward for a moment. I'll make it fast."

He was going to wash my hair for me?

Why?

I must have said the word out loud because Zak asked, "Why what?"

"N'vr mind," I slurred. All I really wanted to do was sleep, but the idea of finally being completely clean, outwardly at least, was too appealing.

I lost track of things completely after that. When I next became aware of my surroundings, I was in bed with Noah and he was snuggled against me. I was sure I'd dreamed the whole thing until I reached up to touch my hair.

It was soft.

And clean.

I turned my head to seek out the chair next to the bed. It was empty and had been moved back to the corner of the room. The weird little bird was nowhere to be found, there weren't dogs and cats all over the place, and even the little horse I was sure I'd seen lying next to Noah was missing.

It was just me and him.

I should have been happy about that... and I was.

But I also kind of wasn't.

And I had no idea why.

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CHAPTER TEN

NOAH

Noah, don't make a sound, okay? No matter what, don't make a sound.
Dad, I'm scared...

"Noah, wake up!"

I tried to pull away from the hands that were holding mine so I could cover my mouth to make sure I didn't make another sound, but I couldn't get free. I yanked as hard as I could and heard a muffled groan.

"Grab his arm!" someone called.

"No, don't hurt him!"

"We won't, Liam. Just talk to him."

I didn't recognize that voice either.

"Noah, please, baby, wake up." The whispered plea sounded so ragged and pain filled. I felt warm fingers on my face. "Noah, it's Liam. I'm here. Wake up. You're safe."

Liam.

I said his name in my head, but I knew it didn't make it to my lips.

It never did.

I let out a harsh sob as the darkness behind my eyes receded and whatever invisible force had been holding them closed went with it. When I opened my eyes, Liam was right there, his face only inches from mine. His hands were on my cheeks and he looked absolutely terrified. I wanted to tell him I was sorry, but even if I could have gotten past the choking sobs that were welling up from my throat, I wouldn't have been able to say the words anyway.

My hands were released, and I automatically curled into Liam's chest.

“It’s alright, I’ve got you,” Liam said softly against my hair as he held me close. It sounded like he was about to cry.

Liam never cried.

Liam was strong and brave. He fought no matter what.

“Here,” I heard someone say from behind me. I remembered the voice.

Zak.

The mattress I was lying on dipped a little. Liam released me only enough so he could put a glass of water to my lips. My body was shaking like crazy and it seemed to take forever for the fog to slowly recede. I heard screeching and looked up to see that the really big guy, Killian, was standing near the door with a very upset Waldo in his hands. The sight of the distressed bird had something inside of me shifting and instead of hanging on to Liam like I wanted, I released him and then pushed past Zak as I got off the bed. My knees buckled, but I managed to catch myself at the same time Zak reached out to steady me.

I pulled free of him and strode on wobbly legs toward the big man. I wanted to yell at Killian for whatever he’d done to upset the bird, but I had to settle for practically pulling little Waldo out of his hands and cuddling the toucan to my chest. I took several steps back from Killian, practically daring him to try and hurt the bird again.

“Noah,” I heard Zak call, but then Killian put his hand up. Zak didn’t say anything else, and I wished like hell I had a way to tell Killian not to be such a bully. I might not have fully trusted Zak, but he’d been nice to me and Liam. I’d thought Killian could be trusted too, but with the way he’d been hurting Waldo...

“Noah, do you remember what I told you about the man who hurt Waldo before Zak and I got him?”

I nodded vehemently.

That was what made Killian’s behavior so much worse. The little bird trusted him.

“Waldo wouldn’t let anyone touch him after that. The people who rescued him had to sedate him to handle him. But for some reason that I still don’t get, he gave his trust to me. I don’t take that lightly,” Killian explained. “I would cut off my right arm before I ever laid a hand on anyone I loved.” I saw Killian’s eyes shift to a point behind me, and in my gut I knew it was Zak that he was looking at. “And I won’t ever break that kind of trust again... ever.” He was still watching Zak as he spoke. I looked

over my shoulder to see that Zak was standing next to the bed now, his eyes on his partner. The longing I saw entrenched in his eyes caused me physical pain. I shot a glance at Liam and saw he was watching the two men too. He seemed as confused as me as to what was happening.

The distance between Zak and Killian was negligible at best... not more than a dozen feet or so. But it was like there was a canyon separating them. I looked back at Killian, who tore his eyes from Zak and looked at Waldo. He reached a finger out and ran it over the toucan's head. Instead of trying to escape the contact, Waldo pushed into it.

"Don't take his trust for granted, Noah," Killian murmured, then he turned and left the room.

Waldo let out a few squawks and squirmed in my hands. I put him down and watched in surprise as he hurried after Killian.

"He wasn't hurting him, Noah," Liam said as he came up behind me. "Waldo was sitting next to you on the bed when you had your nightmare and you accidentally knocked him off it. Killian was only holding him to keep him from getting back to you until we could wake you up."

Guilt slammed into me at Liam's words. I shook my head in disbelief and then covered my mouth with my hands. I looked to Zak and shook my head at him too.

"It's all right," Zak said, his voice uneven and tinged with something that sounded a lot like regret. "He knows you were just trying to protect Waldo."

I looked frantically at Liam because Zak's words didn't make me feel any better. I put my fingers up and made a writing motion.

"Okay, we'll get you something to write on," Liam said quickly. I knew he was surprised by my request because I rarely communicated by writing. Liam had learned to ask me things I could easily respond yes or no to with a nod or shake of my head. "Do you have a pen and paper?" Liam asked Zak.

"Um, yeah, sure," Zak responded, then he was looking around the room. I saw him eye the chair in the corner and then he was moving toward it. He handed Liam a sketchpad and pencil he got off the chair.

Liam opened it for me and found a blank page for me to write on. As he flipped through the sketchpad, more guilt went through me when I saw one sheet after another filled with sketches of Waldo and what looked like drawings of beaks and screws. There were notes about different kinds of metals and plastics on some of the pages.

“Here,” Liam said as he handed me the sketchbook. “Come sit down on the bed,” he added as he put his arm around me. It wasn’t until he said the words that I realized how sick I was feeling.

And not just from how I’d treated Killian and what I’d silently accused him of.

I let Liam lead me to the bed. Once it felt like I wasn’t going to throw up all over the floor, I focused on the piece of paper in front of me.

I could feel my mind shutting down as I started writing. It always did that whenever I was writing something that had anything to do with emotion. It wasn’t something I could make any sense of. I could write responses to homework for hours on end and had no issue with writing essays, but if I ever had to write anything related to how I was feeling, the blackness would come back... I’d overheard Aunt Marjorie telling a teacher once that I’d been seen by countless doctors for it, but I didn’t remember any of that.

I quickly jotted out *I’m sorry, Killian* on the page and then tore the paper free of the sketchpad. I rose to my feet but when my head started to spin, I swayed wildly.

Zak and Liam were both there to help me sit back down. I practically shoved the page into Zak’s hands. I pointed at the paper and then at the doorway.

“Noah, I promise, he’s not upset with you.”

I didn’t believe that for a second. I’d seen the hurt in his eyes. No, it hadn’t all had to do with how I’d treated him, but that didn’t matter. Knowing I’d caused Killian any kind of pain, even for a moment, was torture. I clasped my hands together in front of me like I was praying. I grabbed Zak’s wrist, then turned to frantically look at Liam because I knew he’d get it.

But Liam was looking at where I was hanging on to Zak.

“Noah,” Zak said as he covered my hand with his. Despite the nausea still rolling around in my belly, I felt little sparks dancing beneath my skin where Zak’s fingers were touching me. “I’ll take it to him,” Zak said. “Right now. But you need to lie back down, okay? You’ve been sick for a few days and it’s going to take your body a little time to bounce back.”

I nodded and looked at the paper in his hand. I could see the words I’d written, but they didn’t seem like enough.

I didn't look up as Zak left because my body suddenly felt too weary to do even that.

"Come on, Noah, let's lie down for a bit."

Normally, I was eager to lose myself in Liam's touch, but something felt different now.

Off.

I hated that Liam had seen me behave that way.

I lay down but made sure I was facing away from Liam. I could feel tears filling my eyes as I thought about how I'd treated Killian. He'd just been protecting Waldo.

From me.

Too bad there hadn't been anyone to protect Killian from me jumping to the wrong conclusion.

Or Liam.

Liam was the one who needed the most protection.

Because I was the reason we were here.

I was the reason he was covered in bruises.

I was the reason he'd had to do things that had made him cry at night when he hadn't realized I was awake and could hear him and feel his salty tears falling to my own skin.

I was the reason he'd nearly died in that truck stop parking lot when I'd foolishly thought he would be better off without me.

"Noah, it isn't your fault," Liam said as he pressed his body against the back of mine. I could feel his fingers stroking up and down my cheek. No doubt he felt the tears I couldn't keep in check. "You were trying to protect Waldo."

When I didn't react, I heard Liam sigh, then he dropped his head to my shoulder. I'd always loved that Liam was so demonstrative with his touch... it wasn't something I ever would have guessed about him.

Even though I'd mostly been in my own little world at school, I'd noticed Liam.

I would've had to have been blind not to.

He was beautiful and commanding and had this killer smile that made my stomach do weird things. I'd always been careful not to let anyone see me sneaking looks his way because I hadn't needed even more reasons for the kids to taunt me. And I sure as hell hadn't wanted Liam to be embarrassed that the school's resident freak was checking him out on the

down low. He probably would have been horrified to know that I'd often stayed after school for no other reason than to sit in the bleachers of the football field just so I could watch him practice. I'd pretended I was just reading my dad's journal, but it was one of the few times I hadn't pored over my father's words as he'd described a stage in my life I'd been too young to remember.

When I'd learned that Aunt Marjorie had married Liam's father, I'd been both elated and terrified. I'd already known the feelings I had for Liam went beyond the stereotypical gay kid crushing hard on the straight jock. By the time Aunt Marjorie had announced to me that we'd be moving in with Spencer Savage and his son, Liam had already come to my rescue and made it so the kids backed off me after a very long nine months of cruelty. I'd probably fallen in love with him a little that day, but it'd been the day he'd told me that we were brothers and promised to fix my father's journal that I'd lost the rest of my heart to him. He *had* fixed my father's journal by spending that entire night painstakingly taping the pages back together while I'd slept in his bed. I'd prepared myself for things to go back to the way they'd been at school the next day – after all, I couldn't have asked Liam to just throw away his entire social life just because he'd gotten stuck with “The Creeper” for a brother.

But Liam had insisted I walk down the hallway with him the very next day. I wasn't sure how he'd managed it, but most of the kids had backed off me completely.

They'd been fine with messing with Noah Bristol, the freak, but they hadn't dared lay a hand on Noah Bristol, the younger brother of the great Liam Savage.

Even once Liam had graduated and gone off to college at Ohio State, the kids had mostly left me alone. No, I hadn't become instantly popular and kids had still kept their distance, but I hadn't been afraid to walk in a bathroom or get caught in the locker room by myself after gym class.

Once Liam had left for school, things hadn't really changed much in terms of how Liam and I communicated. He'd video chatted with me nearly every day and told me all about his classes and how football practice was going. Yes, the conversation had been pretty one-sided, but Liam had figured out pretty quickly that I did okay with “talking” to him by answering the yes/no questions with my head. The fact that he went to such lengths to converse with me had stolen the remaining pieces of my heart.

But despite Liam being such a tactile person, he'd never let things leave the brother zone. Yes, we cuddled a lot, but that had been borne of our circumstances and nothing else. Fact was, if you didn't have someone to share body heat with at night when all that was separating you from the elements was a ratty sleeping bag, you were liable to start losing body parts to frostbite or get a respiratory infection that pretty much had death written all over it. If things had changed, it'd only been because we'd been together for so long now and we were each other's only source of physical comfort. I knew not to read too much into Liam's touch or gentle words. If he loved me, it was as his baby brother and nothing more. Like me, he hadn't had any siblings growing up, so when he'd taken that responsibility upon himself the night he'd comforted me in his kitchen, it was like we *had* become brothers in more than just name.

"Noah, will you look at me, please?"

I shook my head.

Liam didn't say anything in response, so I expected him to just let me rest.

But I should have known better.

"You're scaring me, Noah. The nightmares... they're getting worse."

I knew they were. I'd been lucky enough in the past to not remember anything from my dreams, but I was starting to see and hear things that were new.

Like my father talking to me tonight.

That hadn't ever happened before.

I felt my stomach jump violently. I closed my eyes in the hopes of staving off the dizziness that swept through me.

"I couldn't wake you up by myself," Liam continued, clearly not noticing my reaction. I could hear the fear in his voice. "Do you... do you remember any of it?"

I lied and shook my head. I wanted to beg him to drop it, but of course, I couldn't.

"Is it... is it because of what happened before we left home?"

The bile hit the back of my throat without warning. I stumbled out of the bed in the hopes of getting to the bathroom in time, but my body wouldn't cooperate. I hit the ground hard.

"Noah!" Liam called. He reached me just as I started retching all over the floor. But aside from a little bit of water, there was nothing in my body

to expel, so all I was doing was heaving and throwing up bile that burned my throat. Tears streaked down my face at both the pain and the humiliation.

“I’m sorry,” Liam whispered over and over as he rocked me in his arms once the retching had ceased. “I won’t bring it up again, okay, Noah? I promise. I’m sorry.”

I felt his lips skim my temple.

He held my face with one hand so that my ear was near his mouth. “Forgive me, Noah. Please.”

I nodded instantly. If I could have, I would have told him there was nothing to forgive because all of this was my fault. And I would have told him he was better off without me.

It was like he was reading my thoughts because he added, “Don’t ever leave me like that again. I couldn’t bear it.”

I knew what he was talking about, but I didn’t understand it. Why couldn’t he see that I was like a cancer to him? Maybe a blood brother would have deserved such devotion, but what had *I* ever done for him to earn it?

I nodded, though, admittedly, I wasn’t sure if I was being honest or not. If I saw an opportunity for Liam to have even a little piece of himself back, wouldn’t I have to give it to him? Wouldn’t I want to? *Need* to?

The answer was an unequivocal “yes.”

I didn’t resist as Liam helped me to my feet and got me to the bathroom so I could get cleaned up. I really wanted to shower, but I wasn’t sure I could manage on my own. So when Liam asked me if I wanted one, I shook my head and motioned for the bed. I was tired, but not necessarily sleepy. Liam spoke as he stayed by my side while I washed my mouth, face, and hands. He explained that I’d been sick for three days with a fever, but that Zak said my lungs still sounded clear so the chances I’d get pneumonia were unlikely. Normally, I liked listening to Liam rattle on and on as he explained things to me in great detail, but today it made my head hurt. He must have noticed because he fell silent after a minute.

“Zak got you a change of clothes. They’re just pajamas, but they might be more comfortable than the scrubs. Do you want to wear them?” Liam asked as he motioned to a plastic bag hanging from a hook on the back of the door.

I nodded because it would at least make me feel a little bit cleaner.

“I’ll help you, okay?” Liam said as he got the pajamas out. They actually looked like they’d fit me. I wondered if that was Zak’s doing, or Liam’s.

I shook my head. Being around Liam hurt like fucking hell at the moment. All I really wanted to do was feel sorry for myself and cry my eyes out until they hurt too much to keep them open. I held out my hand for the pajamas and sent him a small smile in the hopes he’d get that I would be okay on my own.

My heart twisted painfully in my chest as he looked at me in surprise, then confusion. Our circumstances over the past six months had meant we’d seen plenty of each other in various stages of undress.

But my issue wasn’t with him seeing me naked. I already knew that even if he weren’t straight, I wouldn’t be the kind of guy he’d want to be with. I was short and skinny and had really pale skin. I also had a tendency to look a lot younger than I really was, at least when it came to my body. I knew there were plenty of guys who were into that kind of thing, but Liam liked really strong, confident people. He’d dated only the smartest, most popular girls in high school. They’d been beautiful, confident, and well-spoken.

Besides my obvious physical differences, I wasn’t any of those other things, either.

“Are you sure?” Liam asked.

I forced myself to nod again.

Liam reluctantly left the room. “I’ll be right outside the door if you need me,” he murmured as he shut the bathroom door behind him. I waited until the door was closed before I sank down onto the closed toilet seat. The pajamas felt soft in my hands. I lifted them to my nose and smelled them just so I could enjoy the clean scent. They were definitely clean, but there was another aroma there too.

It definitely wasn’t Liam’s and it wasn’t Zak’s either, despite what Liam had said about Zak getting the pajamas for me.

Zak may have brought them into the room to give to Liam, but it wasn’t his earthy, fresh scent that tickled my nose.

Which meant it was likely someone else who’d bought the pajamas for me.

Killian.

Fresh tears began to fall, and I quickly put the pajamas against my lips and tried to scream into them.

But it was a waste of time because the only thing in that small room besides me was my ever-present companion... complete and utter silence.

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PART III

Killian & Zak

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

ZAK

What the fuck had I done?
I knew the answer, of course.
I'd fucked everything up... again.

And Killian had gotten hurt in the process... *again*.

The edges of the piece of paper Noah had thrust into my hands felt sharp as I clung to the page like it was some kind of lifeline. The young man wasn't the one who had anything to be sorry for. But it'd been clear how devastated he felt about the assumptions he'd made relating to Killian's treatment of Waldo. And even though I knew Killian wouldn't hold that against him, I also understood how important it was for Noah to apologize.

He had a lot more guts than I did.

Both young men did.

Liam and Noah had only been with us for four days and they'd spent nearly all of that time in the guest room. But somehow their presence had had a profound impact on Killian's and my already rocky relationship.

Despite me being home more since I'd taken a few days off work, Killian and I were talking even less, and I didn't know why or how it had happened. At least before the young men had arrived, Killian and I had talked about things that didn't really matter. Now we didn't even have that.

When Killian wasn't at work, he was usually in our home office with the door closed. He'd said he was working on some improvements to Waldo's beak because it was starting to show signs of fatigue. And while I completely believed that was what he was doing, I wasn't really sure why Killian had to avoid me at the same time. In the past, we'd often sat in our

den in the evenings watching TV together or just reading and doing work in companionable silence, usually with me lying on the couch with my head resting on Killian's lap while he toyed with my hair. After things had gone to hell eighteen months ago, that'd changed, but we'd finally been getting back to a point where we could spend time in a room together. I'd hoped it would eventually lead to life getting back to normal, but with the arrival of Liam and Noah, we'd taken several giant leaps backward.

None of it was Liam and Noah's fault.

No, that was all on me.

I'd made the decision to bring Noah home without discussing it with Killian. I'd known it was wrong when I'd done it, but I couldn't explain the need I'd felt to not abandon the young man to whatever fate had been awaiting him while his brother – no, stepbrother – recovered.

I found Killian in our bathroom and that was only because Waldo was sitting outside the closed door, clearly peeved that he'd been shut out.

It wasn't a good sign.

I tried the door. Fortunately, it wasn't locked. I should have asked permission to enter, but part of me wanted to see Killian before he put his mask up... the mask that said everything was fine.

It wasn't fine.

It just wasn't.

And I was fucking terrified that it never would be again.

He was leaning against the sink, his muscled arms flexed as he gripped the edges of the countertop. He was shirtless, so I could see that the muscles along his back and chest were tight with tension too. As upset as I was, I still felt that tug in my cock that I always did when I saw Killian's sinfully beautiful body.

Killian was staring at the water coming out of the faucet. He didn't even notice me.

I'd wanted to see him without his mask, but as I studied the way his eyes focused on that water and saw the tremors that were hitting his body every few seconds, I knew he was as far from fine as he could get.

"Killian."

He stiffened, then put his hands beneath the water like he'd been washing them all along.

Waldo click-clacked into the room and made his way to Killian. Killian was careful to maneuver around the bird as he dried his hands. Waldo

quickly got distracted by the shaggy bath rug.

“Noah okay?” Killian asked.

“Yeah,” I said softly. “He wanted me to give you this.”

I extended my arm because I was suddenly afraid to get too close to him. If I did, I knew I’d throw myself at him and I was terrified of what might happen after that. The old Killian would have held me and promised me that everything was going to be okay, but this Killian – the Killian I’d created with my selfishness – might not say those words. If he were smart, he’d finally wise up and tell me what he should have from the day I’d asked him to move in with me a mere month after meeting him.

You’re not fucking worth it.

Killian took the paper and scanned it. He studied it for a long time. “Did you tell him it wasn’t his fault?”

“Yes,” I responded. My tongue suddenly felt too thick for my mouth. So many things were going through me that I didn’t know what to do with any of them. I ended up saying nothing.

“I’ll talk to him when I get back,” Killian said as he moved past me, giving me a wide berth.

I barely managed to choke back a sob.

I tried to pull myself together as I followed him to the bedroom. “Are you going to a meeting?” I asked.

Killian didn’t answer as he went to the dresser to search out a clean shirt.

“Do you want me to drive you?” I asked. “Noah and Liam will be fine here by themselves for a bit,” I added hopefully.

Despite Liam’s sometimes belligerent attitude, we’d quickly figured out that it was a defense mechanism on his part when he felt out of control. Things with him had changed after Killian and I had helped him get cleaned up a few days earlier. Liam still didn’t seem to trust us, but he hadn’t verbally attacked us like he had early on.

That day had been the one where Killian and I had turned some kind of corner that I still couldn’t make sense of. When I’d walked into the bathroom and seen Killian helping Liam use the bathroom, I’d been surprised at first... and very confused. Killian was great when it came to having a gentle touch with animals, but he tended to be more of a bull in a china shop when it came to people. But he’d been so focused on preserving Liam’s dignity in that moment, that every ounce of love I’d ever felt for

Killian had been multiplied by a million... something I wouldn't have even thought possible. My heart had also hurt for young Liam who'd finally reached his breaking point. When I'd touched his face to get his attention as I'd asked him if he really wanted to take a bath, he'd looked at me with such a mix of vulnerability and trust. I hadn't liked how it'd made me feel.

I'd taken care of thousands of patients in my years as a nurse and I'd had to deal with even more intimately personal situations with many of them, but none ever left me feeling like I owed Killian an apology.

What was worse was that I was certain Killian had noticed something about me in how I'd interacted with Liam because as soon as we'd gotten Liam into the tub, Killian had quickly left the room. He'd been avoiding both young men ever since. The only reason he'd been in the room when Noah had silently accused him of hurting Waldo was because we'd both heard Liam yelling Noah's name and we'd run into the room to see what was happening. Killian had helped me hold Noah down while Liam had tried to wake the younger man up. As soon as Noah had flipped his eyes open, Killian had let him go so he could check on Waldo to make sure the bird hadn't inadvertently gotten hurt in the process of being knocked from the bed.

"No, Delia and I are going for coffee afterward."

I nodded. It was a good thing that he was talking to his sponsor, right?

Then why did I feel like he'd just torn my heart out and stomped on it?

"I fucked this up, didn't I, Killian?" I asked as I watched him get dressed. He paused in the act of putting his arms through the sleeves of the navy-blue shirt he was about to tug on. "I never should have brought them here."

"You wouldn't be you if you hadn't," Killian responded, though he didn't look at me. He pulled his shirt on.

"They're not a stray dog or cat," I countered, because it almost sounded like he was letting me off the hook. "I should have discussed it with you."

Killian finally looked at me. When he started walking toward me, I was both relieved and terrified.

Maybe he'd finally lay into me for the mistakes I'd made. It would be a goddamn relief if he did. And maybe he'd finally walk away like he should have so long ago.

It would be my worst nightmare come to life, but maybe *it* would be a relief in some ways too.

“Don’t do that, Zak,” I heard Killian say as he came to a stop in front of me. His hand came up to clasp my face.

Oh God, how I’d missed him doing this.

“I’m never walking away, baby,” Killian whispered in my ear before he kissed the soft spot behind it. “You want me to go, you need to tell me so.”

“No,” I choked out. “No, never.”

I couldn’t bear to look at him because despite his words, it felt like I had a noose around his neck and he was practically ordering me to tighten it.

“And no, they’re not a stray dog or cat, but they needed someone to fight for them, Zak. If not you, then who?”

“No one comes before you, Killian. I’m afraid you don’t know that.”

He tipped my head up because I was staring at the floor. It was a behavior I hadn’t felt the need to do in a really long time. I had no idea why I was reverting to it now.

I waited for him to answer me. To say that he *did* know it. That he’d never had any doubt and that he never would.

But instead, he leaned in and kissed my cheek. His mouth was so fucking close to mine. I held my breath, but his lips didn’t move.

“Don’t wait up, okay? You’ve been working yourself to the bone. You need to sleep.”

I somehow managed a nod, but I kept the fact that my lack of sleep had absolutely nothing to do with work to myself.

Killian pulled back. I wanted to beg him not to go like this because it felt like another door was being closed on what existed of our old life together.

But he did leave.

I waited until I heard the front door close before I sank to my ass and pulled my knees up against my chest. I stifled the sobs that threatened but trying to keep them in just made them worse. I covered my mouth with my hand to help mute the sound and let go. I wasn’t sure how much time passed before I felt a soft sensation against the free hand I had resting on my thigh. I looked down through tears and saw Waldo looking up at me. He cocked his head back and forth, then gently pecked at my hand again.

I actually let out a watery laugh.

“Now?” I whispered. “Now you decide I’m not a threat to you?”

He pecked my hand again, then turned so he was facing the door and just sat there.

My very own little protector.

I started crying all over again because as much as I loved the little toucan, I needed Killian.

“Zak?”

Liam’s voice had me quickly wiping my eyes and climbing to my feet. I was still trying to dry my eyes when he peeked his head into the open door. “Oh, sorry,” he quickly said. “I, uh... I... sorry.”

I heard his footsteps retreating and knew that it was because he’d seen me trying to get rid of the proof of my emotional breakdown. Humiliation went through me as I considered how I must look to the younger man. I was a big guy with tattoos, piercings, and my fair share of muscles, so it probably looked strange and a little pathetic to see someone like me having a complete meltdown. I remembered how broken Liam had seemed in that bathroom when Killian and I had helped him get cleaned up.

“Liam, wait,” I called. I moved to the door and saw that he’d paused at the top of the stairs. He cast me a quick look.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have come up here... I just wanted to... *fuck*.”

He blanched when he heard his own words.

“No, not fuck like ‘I wanted to *fuck*.’ Fuck like ‘I’m an asshole.’” Liam tore his gaze away. “Jesus Christ,” he muttered.

“It’s okay, what did you need?” I asked. Surprisingly, his show of adorable awkwardness made me feel a tiny bit better. “Is Noah alright?”

“Oh, um, yeah, he’s lying down again. I thought I’d make him something to eat and was wondering if you minded if I poked around your kitchen.”

“Oh, no, of course not. I can make him something,” I offered quickly because cooking would give me the distraction I needed.

“No, I couldn’t ask you to do that,” Liam said. He actually sounded a little weird, but I passed it off as him not wanting to impose.

“I don’t mind,” I said, then admitted, “Cooking relaxes me.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.”

Several of the dogs had followed Liam upstairs. When Bentley nudged his fingers, Liam automatically began petting him.

“Come on, Waldo,” I called. I looked over my shoulder, expecting to see him poking around the bedroom, but to my surprise, he was at my feet.

I followed Liam down the stairs. He kept looking over his shoulder at me with an uncertain expression on his face. It threw me because it was so

very different from how fierce and angry he'd looked in the hospital when he'd grabbed me.

"Is Killian okay?" he finally asked.

We were taking the stairs slowly in deference to Waldo. Killian would have offered the bird his arm, but I didn't want to push my luck with the toucan. But I also didn't want to leave him behind to fend for himself.

"Yeah, he's good," I lied, since I didn't really know what Killian was. "How's Noah?"

"Probably asleep by now," Liam responded. He averted his eyes, but I didn't miss the hurt in them.

So, things might not have gone smoothly for the pair after Killian and I had left the room.

I wasn't sure what to make of the two young men. Their relationship seemed far too intimate to be the brothers they claimed to be... well, stepbrothers.

And why did that distinction bring me this weird relief? I wasn't one to judge others, so even if they'd been blood brothers *and* in a relationship, it wouldn't have been any of my business. But for some reason, my muddled mind couldn't get past the thought that the two not being related by blood was like some kind of obstacle had been removed.

Obstacle to what exactly, though?

"Yeah, he's probably going to need to rest for at least a few days until he gets his strength back," I said.

"Um, yeah," Liam murmured. We'd reached the bottom of the stairs and were just waiting on Waldo to make it down the last few. "We'll be out of your hair just as soon as we can."

I opened my mouth to tell the younger man that he and Noah should stay for as long as they needed, but I snapped it shut when I realized that wasn't my call to make. As concerned as I was for Liam and Noah's safety, I couldn't risk doing any more damage to my relationship with Killian. At this rate, I wasn't even sure I would talk to Killian about the possibility of the younger men staying with us until we could figure out what kind of trouble they were in and help them get back on their feet.

"It's no problem," I said.

Liam nodded awkwardly. "Thanks."

We both fell silent as we watched Waldo use his beak to balance his body as he got down the last step.

“What happened to him?” Liam asked as he pointed to the bird.

I began telling him the story about the abuse the toucan had suffered as we walked to the kitchen. I could see Liam growing angrier and angrier as I continued, and by the time we’d reached the kitchen and Waldo had climbed onto his little ground-level perch so he could pick at the food in his bowl, Liam was raging.

“I hope someone ripped that fucker’s arms from his body.”

I kept my smile to myself because that was pretty much the same thing Killian had said when he’d heard Waldo’s story for the first time.

“So you two have saved all these guys?” Liam asked as he motioned to the various dogs and cats lying around the kitchen.

“A lot of them were supposed to be fosters, but Killian and I just couldn’t face the prospect of letting them go. Not when they’ve become family. The rescue group we volunteer for has this saying that by letting one pet go to its forever family, you can take in and save another pet.”

“But you do both, right?” Liam said.

I chuckled. “Yeah... we’re still trying to figure out the letting go part, obviously. Killian and I always wanted to have a big family, so—”

My words dropped off when I realized that that dream was in true jeopardy. Despite having so many rescue animals that we truly did want as part of our family, Killian and I had always talked about having kids. It was something that we’d discussed on an almost daily basis before life had gone to hell.

“Zak?”

I heard Liam’s voice but was too entrenched in the idea of a future without Killian and the human family we’d dreamed about.

“Zak?” Liam repeated, but it wasn’t until he touched my arm that I was jolted from my thoughts.

“Sorry,” I murmured as I pulled away from him so I wouldn’t lean into his touch like I wanted. The fact that I even wanted that made me feel sick to my stomach. “How about some broth for Noah?” I asked as I turned to the cabinets and began looking through my spice rack. “I’ve got these bouillon cubes that have a decent amount of flavor. And if you add the right spices to it...”

“Do you have chicken, by chance?” Liam cut in. I turned to look at him and swore that he looked kind of sheepish. I passed it off to the awkwardness of the situation overall.

“You mean like chicken pieces?”

“Um, yeah. A whole chicken would be best... we could use the main parts to make some roasted chicken or something and then use the leftovers to make a really nice chicken soup. I can strain out the solid stuff for Noah until he’s feeling better.”

“Yeah, I think we have one,” I said as I went to the fridge and began sorting through it. “You know how to cook?” I asked Liam.

He shrugged. “I can throw a few things together. I kind of had to learn after my mom died because my dad worked a lot. Peanut butter sandwiches got really old really fast.”

His voice dropped a little when he mentioned his mother. “Do you mind?” he asked as he motioned toward the spice cabinet.

“Not at all,” I said.

I watched Liam from the corner of my eye as he went through the spices and took out at least half a dozen. Only a couple were ones I would have chosen. I grabbed the chicken from the bottom shelf of the refrigerator and placed it in the sink.

As Liam began asking me if I had certain vegetables, I started pulling them from the refrigerator. The younger man was setting up a space on the island where he could work. He was clearly in the zone as he organized himself, and when he finally got the chicken cleaned and laid out on the cutting board, he seemed to finally remember my presence.

“Oh, sorry,” he murmured as he put down the knife he’d been sharpening. “Did you want to—”

“No,” I said as I put up my hand. “Keep going. You obviously know what you’re doing.”

Liam shrugged. “Watched some YouTube videos and cooking shows. I’m okay, but...”

“But what?” I asked when he didn’t continue.

“Nothing,” he said with a shake of his head.

I didn’t like how the fire I’d just seen in him seemed to die a quick death. Whatever pleasure he’d found in the act of getting ready to cook was gone.

Snuffed out.

I felt the loss more than I wanted to admit.

“I always wanted to learn how to cook,” I said. “Like, *really* cook.”

“You can cook. Killian said you were very... *creative*.”

Was the young man actually blushing as he said the words? He kept shooting me little glances that had my body reacting in the most inconvenient way. Shame curled through me.

“Killian and I each used to live on take-out food when we met. Once I started nursing school and learned about nutrition and stuff, I figured we should probably eat things that were a little less artery-clogging.”

“You guys are in fantastic shape,” Liam scoffed. This time he was definitely blushing when he seemed to realize what he’d said. “I mean, you obviously take care of yourselves.”

Heat spread throughout my body, mixing with the guilt I was feeling that I was even noticing things about Liam that I shouldn’t be.

Like the blushing.

Or how gracefully his long fingers moved as he worked.

I remembered how his body had felt against mine and what it had been like to look over his shoulder at Killian as we’d worked together to get Liam into the tub. I’d been ashamedly turned on by the sight of Killian’s gorgeous mouth near Liam’s ear as he’d whispered words of support and encouragement to the younger man.

Turned on.

Not jealous.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

A tense silence fell between me and Liam. I knew I should just leave him to it and go do some of my continuing education work, but my feet wouldn’t obey my brain.

“Do you have a stock pot?” Liam asked.

I managed to utter an uneven-sounding “yes” and went in search of the pot.

“Well, you obviously know what you’re doing, so I should leave you to it,” I said.

I was in the process of turning away when Liam suddenly blurted, “I could teach you.”

“What?” I asked, more because I needed to say something instead of just standing there getting lost in his intense, dark blue eyes. He was still covered in bruises and lacerations, but they were starting to fade a bit and the swelling had gone down enough that I could make out his features more than when he’d first been admitted. He was a beautiful young man, much

like his stepbrother. But while Noah was more “pretty” and had a certain softness to him, Liam had the kind of striking good looks that turned heads.

“I mean, not that you need to learn anything because that broth you made was really good, but I could... I mean, as a thank you for everything you and your boyfriend... Killian... have done for us... *fuck*.”

I smiled because it was the second time he’d babbled incessantly and ended his sentence with the same frustrated swear word. Never in a million years would I have guessed the guy who’d been ready to do battle with me and Killian to protect his stepbrother would be so lacking in confidence.

“Never mind,” Liam spit out. His attitude changed just like that and I realized it was probably because I’d been too quiet and had just been staring at him. His self-defense mechanism of lashing out was clearly kicking in.

“I’d love to learn,” I said as I moved closer to him. He was about the same height as me, but I probably outweighed him by a good thirty pounds. I figured once he put some weight back on, our builds would be a pretty close physical match. “It never even occurred to me to try and watch some videos,” I admitted. “I look up recipes and stuff, but I’m not really techie. We use certain applications at the hospital, but I’m always the one the computer decides to humiliate. I heard the IT team has a monthly contest to see who has to come to my rescue most often.”

Liam was silent for a moment as he worked. I practically held my breath to see if he was going to open up to me again or just shut down altogether. I was thinking it was going to be the latter when he murmured, “Me neither.” He paused, then glanced at me. “I’m not good at computer stuff, either. Noah’s like a genius with them. He pretty much knows everything about everything.”

The way he smiled when he talked about his stepbrother made me feel good inside for some reason. There was clearly some kind of bond between the pair that went beyond a sibling relationship, and it made me glad that they’d found that in one another. But it also made me curious if there was something more there too. The intimate touches Liam gave Noah and the way the younger man inherently trusted his older “brother” hinted that there was a relationship of some kind that went beyond the normal familial bonds.

“What about you?” I asked. “You clearly know how to cook,” I remarked as I motioned to all the ingredients lying on the island...

ingredients I wouldn't have even considered using. "What else are you good at?"

Liam shrugged. "Not much," he said. "Noah, he's going to change the world, though."

The fact that he'd shifted the conversation back to Noah didn't surprise me. It was just further proof that his feelings for his stepbrother were complex. I had no idea if Liam was gay or bi or just really, really confused, but my gut was telling me that he wasn't entirely straight. I'd seen him casting glances at Killian as he'd been getting the bath ready for Liam.

My brain suddenly went to a place I hadn't considered before but that had me freaking out all the same.

What if Killian had noticed Liam too? He *had* left the bathroom very quickly once we'd gotten Liam in the tub. And the way he'd encouraged Liam with soft words... that wasn't normal Killian behavior.

A whole host of emotions went through me but surprisingly, jealousy wasn't the primary one.

Fear was.

Stark raving fear.

I'd always expected that Killian would walk away from me, but to do it in front of me and with someone I'd brought into our lives?

No... no, Killian would never disrespect me that way. He was a better man than that. But what if being around someone like Liam was a reminder that there was someone better for Killian out there... someone who didn't ask him to give up his dreams because of their own fears?

"Zak?"

Liam's gentle voice cut through the panic that was consuming me. I was reminded of when he'd calmed Noah down the day I'd brought Liam home.

"What?" I asked. Shivers were running up and down my spine, which didn't make sense.

Until I looked down to see that at some point Liam had put the knife down and was covering my fisted hand with his.

"Did you want to try?" the younger man asked me.

"Try what?" I asked stupidly. I couldn't remember a time I'd ever felt this muddled in the head. I was admired at work for being able to stay cool and collected under even the craziest of circumstances, but if they could see the shit going through my mind at the moment...

"Breaking down the chicken."

I tried to swallow but couldn't really manage it. Part of me wanted to throw Liam out of my house, but the other part wanted to lean into him and just soak up some of his kindness.

"Yeah," I croaked.

It took a while to get my brain focused on the process of cooking, but once I did, I found Liam to be a patient teacher and the passion he'd shown early on was back as he explained different tricks to help bring out the flavors in both the chicken we were making for dinner and the soup for Noah. By the time we were done, the sun was falling and as Liam went to check on Noah, I began cleaning up and getting ready to feed the animals their dinner. My eyes kept straying to my phone to make sure I hadn't missed a text from Killian, but there was nothing. When Liam didn't return to the kitchen, I went to check on him and Noah and found them both asleep in their usual position with Noah tucked against Liam's front and Liam's arms wrapped around his slim body. I'd let Nana in hours earlier when she'd angrily banged her hoof on the back door while Liam and I had been cooking. The mini had made herself at home sleeping along Noah's back and Waldo was once again sitting guard on the footrail.

Loneliness swept through me as I watched the little group for a while. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and started typing a note out to Killian, but I didn't press send. I just left the message there on my phone and stared at it for a while.

Waldo let out a little squawk.

I walked up to him and held my fingers out to see what he'd do.

Nothing.

He did nothing.

Until I started to pull my hand back.

Then he suddenly lifted his beak so the smooth material came into contact with my finger.

It was the strangest of victories, but it was something, at least.

"Thanks, buddy," I whispered to him. "I needed that." I hesitated a moment, then said, "Keep watch over them, okay?"

I turned to go and pulled out my phone as I carefully closed the bedroom door, leaving just enough room for Nana or Waldo to get out if they needed to get to their food or water.

I stared at the message I'd typed out to Killian.

I miss you.

My finger hovered over the send button, but I couldn't make myself hit it. Killian had said he'd never leave me unless I told him to go. Under normal circumstances, those words would have meant the world to me. But all I heard now was something very different when those words replayed in my head over and over.

I'm staying because I promised I would.

I felt sick to my stomach as I deleted my text and then headed toward the bedroom I shared with Killian.

Our bedroom.

I tried to focus on that fact as I got undressed and settled beneath the blanket, but the only thing that kept popping into my head was the fear that I'd soon be calling it just *my* room.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

KILLIAN

I heard him before I saw him. For someone who didn't speak, he was surprisingly loud when he moved. I wondered if he had crappy night vision because he kept bumping into things. First the doorjamb, then one of the kitchen stools for the island, then the refrigerator itself. I almost thought the young man was sleepwalking.

Until I saw his expression when he opened the refrigerator door and the light fell across his features.

He looked like he could barely breathe.

"Noah," I said quickly as I stood and flicked on the light switch that was just a couple feet from me.

Noah jumped and let out a little screech-grunt sound. He'd been holding something in his hands that fell to the ground.

I hurried to him and reached for his arms, then thought better of it. "I'm sorry," I said. "It's just me, Killian."

I could see Noah struggling to breathe.

Fuck, it was another panic attack like the one he'd had the first time I'd tried to wake him from a nightmare.

"It's okay, Noah, just try to slow your breathing for me."

He gasped and just started wheezing even more.

Liam.

Liam could help him.

"I'll get Liam," I said. I turned to hurry to the guest bedroom when Noah suddenly grabbed my wrist. He shook his head violently. He tried to hold his breath, but he couldn't manage it and he began to whimper. His fingers were digging into my palm.

“Let me get Liam... or Zak,” I said, because I had no doubt I was scaring him.

Instead of releasing me, Noah pulled my hand up so it was resting against his cheek. He closed his eyes and tried to hold his breath. I remembered how Liam had held his face during that first panic attack. I hesitated before putting my other hand on his opposite cheek. I opened my hands so I was cradling his face. His skin felt warm beneath my fingers, his cheekbones delicate. Noah’s free hand came up to close around my other wrist so that he was hanging onto both of them.

“That’s it,” I encouraged. “Focus on my voice and hold your breath.”

Noah closed his eyes and pressed his lips together. I began counting backward from ten. “Now let it out for ten,” I said as I repeated the countdown. Noah’s nails finally stopped biting into my skin on the third round. He opened his eyes and watched me as I repeated the countdown three more times for good measure. “Good,” I murmured when I saw that he was breathing normally.

When he relaxed in my hold, I said, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

He shook his head and released one of my wrists so he could point at the light above the kitchen island.

“You don’t like the light?” I asked.

He shook his head and pointed at the light again. Understanding dawned.

“You don’t like the dark,” I said.

He took one of my hands and put it to his chest, then sucked in a breath.

“It makes it hard to breathe,” I acknowledged.

Noah nodded. I fell silent as my attention was drawn to the soft material beneath my hand.

He was wearing the pajamas I’d gotten him.

The realization pleased me.

I didn’t realize I was still holding onto him until I heard his breathing tick up again. When I looked up from where my big hand was resting on his small chest, I saw that his eyes had gone wide and his lips had parted just a little.

I released him as if I’d been burned.

“Do you like them?” I blurted, wanting like hell to focus on something besides the look in his eyes I was certain I was seeing.

Desire.

It seemed to take Noah several seconds to pull free of whatever haze he'd been in. He shook his head in clear confusion.

"The pajamas," I said. "I got them from Walmart a few days ago while I was getting you and Liam a few things like toothbrushes and underwear—"

Shut up, Killian.

"I wasn't sure what size you wore so I had to guess. It looks like I got it right," I blathered as I looked him up and down.

Shut up right fucking now, Killian.

"It's really convenient having a Walmart nearby. It just opened up a few months ago. Before that, we'd have to drive about a half an hour to get to one. It's one of those that has the grocery store right in it so we can do all our shopping in one place."

Jesus Christ, was I really talking about the benefits of *Walmart*?

Noah stared at me like he didn't know what to think.

I didn't blame him.

"So, um, did you need something?" I asked as I motioned to the refrigerator. "I noticed some chicken soup in there earlier. Do you want to give that a try?"

As I spoke, I bent to pick up the item Noah had dropped when I'd startled him. I stilled when I realized it was my sketchpad.

When I looked at Noah in surprise, he blushed prettily and then pointed quickly at the notepad, then made a writing motion, then pointed at me. It took me a moment to figure out what he was trying to tell me.

"You used my sketchpad to write the note you asked Zak to give me?"

Noah nodded and then pointed at the sketchpad again, then me, then the kitchen island.

"And you wanted to return it to me."

Another nod.

"Thank you," I said as I put the sketchpad down on the island. "Zak gave me the note. I wasn't mad at you, Noah. It made me happy to see someone else fighting for Waldo like that."

Noah frowned and then pointed at me and shook his head. This time I had no way of knowing what he was trying to say. But whatever it was, it seemed to upset him. I could only assume he was still trying to apologize because he kept pointing at himself and shaking his head. I ended up grabbing his hand to stop him. I covered his fingers with my other hand so I

was holding his one hand with both of mine. “Honestly, Noah, I’m not upset.”

He cocked his head at me and squinted his eyes a little.

“Okay,” I admitted finally. “For a few seconds it kind of sucked to have you looking at me like I was a monster.”

He began shaking his head again and pointing at my chest. I chuckled and grabbed his other hand. “But I know you don’t see me that way. It was an honest mistake and I would love it if we could just forget about it.”

Noah hesitated, then finally nodded. It wasn’t until he looked down at our joined hands that I realized I’d ended up holding on to him yet again.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

I was missing Zak, that was all.

And feeling like shit for walking out the door like I had... for not manning up and talking it out with him like I should have. He’d clearly been feeling vulnerable about me walking out on our relationship like he often had when we’d first gotten together, but I’d been too raw from everything that’d been going on to deal with it. Between my strange reaction to Liam’s vulnerability the other day when I’d helped him in the bathroom, to Noah’s disturbing nightmares and my need to find out what was causing them, to Zak’s pained expression every time I looked at him, I was so fucked up in the head that I couldn’t think straight. I’d needed to get my ass to a meeting. I’d spent hours talking to my sponsor, Delia, over shitty coffee, then I’d gone to yet another meeting because the need to find a bottle of alcohol had been so overpowering.

And it still hadn’t been enough.

I forced myself to release Noah. “How are you feeling?”

I realized my error pretty quickly when Noah stood mutely before me, then began nodding his head and moving his hands.

Fuck.

“Sorry,” I mumbled as I rephrased the question. “Are you feeling better?”

Noah seemed to relax. He quickly nodded.

“You look better,” I said. “Not that you looked bad before, but you just...”

I let my words drop off, then took his arm and pulled him aside so he wasn’t standing in front of the cold, open refrigerator. I grabbed two bottles of water and set them on the kitchen island, then the pot of chicken soup I’d

spied earlier when I'd seen the note on the fridge from Zak about him having left me some dinner.

"Are you hungry?" I asked as I set the soup down on the stove. "I was about to have a little myself," I lied in the hopes that it would encourage Noah to eat something. He was skinny, but he didn't have the same malnourished look that Liam did. It was a reminder that Liam had probably put Noah's needs above his own.

It was a testament to the lives they'd been leading. I'd seen enough kids on the streets to know how scarce resources were, and even the closest of buddies often turned on one another when it came down to survival instincts.

Noah nodded.

I got the soup reheating on the stove, then motioned to the kitchen table as I grabbed the bottles of water. Noah seemed nervous, but he went to the table. I froze when I saw the bottle of whiskey I'd left sitting on the table, alongside a single glass.

But Noah didn't react.

Why would he?

He had no clue what that bottle meant.

I went around the table and sat down. I pushed the unopened bottle aside even as my mind screamed for me to uncap the thing and take a long swig.

I opened my bottle of water instead.

Noah watched me a moment, then motioned to the liquor bottle. The question was clear in his eyes.

"Um, no, I don't want it," I said. "Well, I *do*, but that's the problem."

Noah looked between me and the bottle, completely confused.

"I'm an alcoholic," I said.

Noah's eyes widened a little, but if I expected to see judgement or recrimination, it just wasn't there.

"I bought it on the way home from an AA meeting tonight. Do you know what that is?"

Noah nodded.

I dropped my eyes. "Yeah, well, usually those meetings help put things back in perspective for me and if they don't, I talk to my sponsor. Neither of those things were working, so I just..."

I shook my head because I didn't really know how to finish the statement. I still didn't know why I'd bought the alcohol. I'd been staring at it for the better part of an hour now in the darkened kitchen and while my body craved it, my brain had been fighting tooth and nail for me to not touch the thing.

I was caught off guard when Noah reached for my hand. I thought his intent was to hold it in an effort to comfort me, but he surprised me when he curled my fingers under on my left hand, leaving only my pointer finger straight. I smiled to myself when I realized he was having me write letters out with my own hand.

The smile faded when I realized what letters he was spelling out.

Z.

A.

K.

I waited until he put the question mark on the end. In my gut, I knew what he was asking me. "Zak knows I'm an alcoholic."

It was hard to meet Noah's eyes but when he tapped my hand, I looked up. He pointed at me, then his own mouth, then the invisible writing on the table.

I sighed as shame consumed me.

"No, I didn't talk to Zak about things after the meetings and my sponsor didn't work."

I could practically hear his unasked question. It was the next logical one for him to wonder about.

Why not?

Before he could find a way to ask it, I got to my feet and said, "I better check the soup."

The soup wasn't anywhere near hot enough, but I stirred it anyway. It actually looked really good.

I put the lid back on it and turned the temperature up a little. As I went back to the table, I noticed my sketchbook. I grabbed it and a pen in case Noah wanted to communicate anything. It would save me from having to feel those little sparks of sensation when he touched me.

I sat back down and went to open the pad to an empty page when Noah covered my hand with his and quickly shook his head.

"You don't want me to open it?" I asked.

He shook his head again.

“I thought we could use it in case you had any questions—”

Another shake of his head.

“Okay,” I said, simply because he seemed to be getting more and more distressed. I pushed the pad away. “Is Liam asleep?” I asked.

A nod.

“Is he still feeling okay?”

There was a slight hesitation, then Noah put his hand against his side.

I nodded in understanding. “Zak said his ribs are very badly bruised. Those will take a little time to heal.”

Noah dropped his eyes. I swore I could see them tearing up.

“But he’ll be okay,” I quickly reassured him. When he didn’t react, I added, “You guys really take care of each other, huh?”

Noah didn’t move at first. Finally, he pointed at himself and shook his head, then pointed in the direction of the guest bedroom, then back at himself.

“Liam takes care of you?” I asked.

Noah nodded.

“And you take care of Liam?” I prodded, though I was pretty sure I already knew his answer.

When he didn’t respond at all, I said, “I bet if you asked Liam that, you’d get a very different answer than the one you’re thinking.”

Noah wiped at his eyes and shook his head. Since I was worried the conversation would scare him off before he ate something, I said, “I should give you fair warning about something.”

I wiggled my finger so he’d move closer, like I was about to reveal some big secret. “Zak isn’t the best cook in the world.”

Noah smiled at me. It was almost a conspiratorial smile.

“What?” I asked, side-eyeing him.

He got up and went to the pot of soup. He stirred it with the wooden spoon, then dipped it into the soup and put his hand beneath it so he could bring it to me. He held it so I could take a taste. I prepared myself for an assault of salt, but when a host of delicious flavors exploded on my tongue, I actually let out a little groan.

Noah smiled knowingly, then sipped up what was left on the spoon.

Something in my body went haywire as I watched his pink tongue lick the spoon in the exact spot my mouth had been. Noah was smiling again

when he looked at me, but there must have been something in my expression because he stilled.

Then he looked down at the spoon.

I saw the moment it hit him what he'd done.

And instead of looking mortified or confused, he looked...

No, no, no.

The same fire that had started in my belly as I'd watched Zak and Liam's body perfectly align right before we'd gotten the younger man into the tub exploded into a wildfire. What would the three of them look like together? With Noah between them? Or Zak? My man was the most passionate lover I'd ever known. What would he look like if he was being loved from front and back?

What if it wasn't just front and back, but more? What sounds would he make? How hard would he come? What would he look like when he worked to please his lovers?

Lovers.

With an s.

What the fuck?

I stood so quickly I actually knocked the chair over. Noah jumped back.

"Sorry," I mumbled. "I just remembered I need to check if I locked the front door."

Noah nodded shakily. I felt bad for scaring him, but that didn't stop me from leaving the kitchen and hurrying to the front door. I knew I'd locked it, but I just needed a minute to get a grip on my runaway thoughts.

Zak was mine.

Period.

Not once from the moment we'd first fucked in that bar's dirty bathroom had we even entertained the thought of seeing other people or bringing men into our bed for fun. I hadn't even fantasized about it.

So why the hell was I doing it now?

The need to storm up to our bedroom so I could fuck Zak into the mattress so he never doubted who he belonged to was like a living thing beneath my skin. But along with that red-hot need was the desire to taste Noah's lips.

To watch Liam bringing Zak pleasure that only I could give him.

To feel Zak's tight body gripping mine as we watched Noah and Liam lose themselves in one another... and us.

God, I needed to get control of myself. My cock already felt like it was going to bust out of my pants.

By the time I'd settled enough to go back to the kitchen, Noah was gone and the burner for the pot of soup had been turned off. I saw my sketchpad sitting open on the table.

There was only one word on the blank page.

Sorry.

Nothing more.

Had Noah realized what I was thinking, or did he think I was upset for a completely different reason?

The idea that I'd chased the sweet young man off made me want to rip into the rest of the chairs surrounding the table. Instead, I grabbed the bottle of whiskey and strode over to the sink. I could smell the liquor when I opened the bottle, but as much as my body craved the drink, the smell made me feel sick.

I'd come so fucking close to betraying Zak.

In more ways than one.

In some ways, I *had* betrayed him.

I dumped the whiskey down the drain and then jammed the empty bottle into the garbage. After putting the soup back in the fridge, I went to grab my sketchpad so I could work in my office a bit. All I really wanted to do was go climb into bed next to Zak, but I didn't trust myself just yet. I was too on edge and I didn't want to take my emotions out on Zak in any kind of way, but especially by using sex.

That seemed like even more of a betrayal.

By the time I got to my office and closed the door, I'd calmed down marginally. I sank down onto the leather couch and started skimming through the sketchpad to get to the next blank page. The ideas for improving on Waldo's beak had been pestering me for a while because I had yet to find the right combination of material and fasteners that would do the trick and last longer than the first prototype. Putting Waldo through the procedure caused him a lot of stress, so I wanted to make sure the next time we did it, it would hopefully also be the last time. But I wasn't an engineer... I was just someone who liked to tinker. I was starting to accept that Zak and I would need to find someone who had either done something like this before or had the knowledge to design something new for Waldo. Zak and I didn't have a ton of extra money lying around, but we'd figure

out a way to pay someone to come up with the best prototype, even if it meant dipping into our savings.

As I skimmed through the pages, I started to notice something on each one.

Notes.

A lot of them.

Ones *I* hadn't written.

And there were additions to my sketches.

What the hell?

When I reached the final page right before the note Noah had left me, I saw a drawing of a beak along with notes about several different materials that could be combined to form an adhesive that would support the seam. There were comments about the type of screws to use.

Noah.

Holy hell, had Noah done all this?

I remembered how he'd been reluctant for me to open the sketchpad so he could write in it while we were talking.

Had he been worried about me seeing all this?

I went back to the beginning and started reading through his notes one by one until I got to the last page and reviewed his mock-up. I had no clue if his suggestions would work or not, but it was a place to start. I could at least research if the material could be printed using a 3-D printer or some other less costly process.

I smiled to myself as I went to a blank page and began writing.

Cute, sweet little Noah might not be able to speak, but he sure as hell had a lot to say. As I wrote, I couldn't help but wonder what other secrets he and his "brother" were hiding.

Unfortunately, I was almost completely certain those secrets wouldn't be as delightful to learn about.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ZAK

“Morning.”

I kept my gaze on the wall straight ahead of me as Killian entered the kitchen. I may have responded in kind, but I wasn't sure.

Because my head was still spinning over my discovery.

I felt Killian's hand touch my shoulder and then there was a brief kiss on the top of my head. I could hear Killian moving around behind me, doing his normal morning routine.

Coffee in his travel mug... black, one sugar.

A fresh banana for Waldo on his perch.

Treats for all the other animals.

Then came my goodbye kiss.

Way back when, it had been on my mouth. These days it was on my temple. I was surprised I was still even getting them.

“I'll try to get off early,” Killian murmured.

“Why?” I asked as he began walking away.

“What?”

I was still staring straight ahead, but I could tell he'd stopped moving. I turned my head so I could look at him. My heart clenched at the sight of him like it always did. Seven years later and every time I looked at him, I still had the same reaction I had when we'd locked eyes in that bar.

“Why are you going to try and get off early, Killian?” I asked.

“So I can come home and—”

“And what?” I cut in. My heart hurt too much to even raise my voice.

Killian dropped his eyes. "I'm going to be late to work, Zak," he murmured.

"Yeah, we wouldn't want that, would we?" I asked as I turned my attention back to my coffee cup.

I heard him turn to leave. "Killian," I called.

He stopped but didn't respond.

"Glass bottles go in the recycling, not the trash."

I was certain I heard him pull in a breath. A moment later, he was sitting down in the chair kitty-corner to mine. "Zak, it isn't what you think."

I looked at him. My throat still hurt from the sobs I'd forced myself to stifle when I'd discovered the empty whiskey bottle in the garbage. I wouldn't have even noticed the thing if the smell of it hadn't been so damn strong. I'd never been a drinker myself, besides some beers now and again when I went out with my co-workers after a shift. In deference to Killian, I never drank around him and we didn't keep any alcohol in the house. So smelling the very thing that had played such a huge part in the downturn of our relationship had been a fucking shitty way to start the day.

"I bought it, yes, but I didn't drink it. I swear."

I let out a harsh laugh. I wiped at my damp face and then looked him dead in the eye. "If that's the part of all this that you think has me so upset, then we're in even worse trouble than I thought, Killian," I whispered.

Killian's mouth tightened a little, but instead of lashing out at me, he looked away.

"I have to go," he said. "We can talk about this tonight."

I felt what remained of my heart break in two because I knew we wouldn't talk about it. The next real conversation we had would likely be the final one. Or we'd have to go back to talking but not really saying anything at all.

As Killian got up and left the room, this time without touching me or kissing me goodbye, I knew we wouldn't be able to go back to the way things had been.

I'm never walking away, baby... You want me to go, you need to tell me so.

I choked back a sob at the thought of trying to tell Killian to go. I didn't think I could do it. But I couldn't keep living like this...

I jumped in surprise when the chair next to mine shifted because I hadn't heard Killian come back. In that split second it took me to turn my

head, I felt my heart leap with joy and hope.

But it wasn't Killian.

"Noah," I said with surprise. "I'm sorry, I... I didn't hear you," I stammered as I tried to get control of my emotions. "Did you sleep well? Can I make you some breakfast?"

I started to get up just so I could have a second to collect myself, but Noah covered my hand with his. Warmth radiated out from the spot, and it was all I could do not to break down then and there.

I noticed that Noah had a little pad of paper and a pen in his hand. The pad was the one Killian and I kept on the small desk on the far side of the kitchen. We used it to jot down notes for each other and tack them to the refrigerator.

It seemed like a lifetime ago that our notes had been more about telling each other that we loved one another or missed each other. These days the pad served only to pass benign notes back and forth like that we needed milk or that dinner was in the fridge.

I watched as Noah began writing something on the pad. He slid it over to me.

I don't think he drank any of it. I saw him last night. The bottle wasn't opened.

"You were with Killian last night?" I asked.

Noah nodded, then his eyes went almost comically wide. He began violently shaking his head and I swore I heard him whimper. He snatched the pad back and tried to write something on it. He was so distressed that he was actually ripping the paper with how much pressure he was applying.

"Hey, it's okay," I said as I grabbed his hands to stop him. "I know you didn't mean like *that*."

Noah was breathing hard as he stared at me. Then he dropped his eyes and I saw him blush. I felt my stomach fall as I took in his reaction.

"Did something happen, Noah?" I asked. The idea of Killian and Noah together had the same effect on me that picturing my lover and Liam together did. It excited and scared me at the same time.

Noah shook his head. He was clearly feeling guilty.

He ripped off the torn pieces of paper and then wrote something down.

I embarrassed him.

As I read the note, he started on another one.

He was trying to make me feel better. Nothing happened. He loves you.

I hadn't even finished reading the note before another one was thrust in front of me.

I promise, Zak. I'm sorry.

I looked at him and took in his fear-filled eyes. He was so young and innocent and sweet. I couldn't help but reach out to run my fingers down his cheek.

"It's okay, Noah. I believe you."

And I did. Despite what had just happened between me and Killian, I knew in my gut he would never cheat on me. I dropped my hand and stared at the hastily written notes in front of me.

"I'm afraid things are a little more complicated than whether or not he drank that bottle."

Another note appeared in front of me.

Liam and I don't talk, either.

I looked at Noah, mostly because I was shocked that he was sharing anything about him and his stepbrother with me at all.

"Why not?" I asked softly.

He shook his head and pointed at himself.

"You think it's your fault?" I asked.

He nodded.

"I'm sure he doesn't believe—"

Noah shook his head, and I snapped my mouth shut because I recognized the look in his eyes. He didn't want empty reassurances.

He wanted understanding.

I fiddled with the notes he'd written me. "I did something to Killian about eighteen months ago," I admitted. "I thought... I thought I was going to lose him, and I wasn't thinking, but it just ended up fucking everything up and I don't know how to fix it."

No note appeared...

There was no attempt at a comforting touch...

I looked up and saw Noah watching me intently.

Listening.

Just listening.

So I talked.

And talked.

And fucking *talked*.

I said the things I couldn't say to Killian to a barely legal young man who I knew in my heart understood everything I was saying... had felt those things himself.

By the time I was done, my body was shaking, and it was all I could do not to just break down completely. I was staring down at the tabletop when I heard Noah's chair move. I was both glad and disappointed that he was going to leave me to my misery.

But he didn't leave.

Not even close.

I let out a little whimper when I felt his slim arms wrap around me from behind. I began to cry in earnest. Noah's chin settled on my shoulder, but it wasn't enough for me. I shut off the part of my brain that reminded me I was leaning too heavily on the young man and turned so I could wrap an arm around his waist. He came into my hold easily, willingly. I wrapped my other arm around him and buried my face in his chest. Even with me still sitting and him standing, I nearly reached his shoulder.

Noah's hands came up to cradle the back of my head and neck as I clung to him. I could feel his mouth moving near my temple, but there was no sound to accompany it. But it didn't matter because just having his warm body to hold onto was enough.

For now.

PART IV

Liam & Noah

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

NOAH

“We can’t get too close to them, Noah,” were the words I heard when I entered the bedroom and saw Liam sitting on the bed staring out the window that overlooked the back yard. He’d been asleep when I’d left the room to get him some coffee. I personally didn’t like the stuff, but I knew Liam couldn’t function without it.

I came to a stop in front of him and handed him the hot mug. He took it but used his free hand to grab mine before I could draw it away.

“You understand that, right?”

I nodded.

My heart was still breaking for Zak, but I didn’t regret what I’d done. It didn’t surprise me that Liam had overheard us... well, Zak. With how I’d taken off on Liam right before he’d been beaten up, it was no wonder that waking up and finding me gone this morning would have immediately had him seeking me out.

I wrapped my fingers around Liam’s and held onto his hand as I maneuvered so I could sit down next to him. I, myself, was feeling much better, though I was still more physically tired than I would have liked. Liam was also on the mend, but his bruised ribs were definitely still bothering him. Whenever he shifted in bed, he groaned. He’d started taking some of the ibuprofen that Zak and Killian had left for him, but I knew it would be a while before he was able to move around more comfortably.

Liam’s fingers played with mine as he sipped at the coffee.

I thought back to the conversation I’d overheard between Killian and Zak and the information I’d learned from Zak. I doubted the man had

intended to tell me so much, but I was glad he had.

I released Liam's fingers and got up so I could grab the notepad off the nightstand. There was a pen next to it, so I grabbed that too. I wasn't sure who'd put it there, but I was glad someone had been considerate enough to do so.

My hands began to tremble as I started writing, but I forced myself to focus on the words I was writing and ignored the darkness I could feel simmering in my belly.

I turned the notepad toward Liam.

How much did you hear?

"Most of it," Liam murmured.

Which meant he'd likely seen me giving comfort to Zak. I wondered if that was the part he was most worried about. Not from a jealousy perspective, because I knew that wasn't even a possibility. But his comment about not getting too close to the men proved something else.

He didn't want us to get too comfortable.

Getting too comfortable was dangerous in our world. Being complacent meant you were basically inviting something bad to happen to you. We'd learned that the first time a guy had offered to give us a ride the last fifty miles to Las Vegas so we wouldn't have to walk because "it was the right thing to do."

Liam and I had been so tired that we'd ended up falling asleep in the back seat. When we'd woken up, we hadn't been anywhere near the interstate anymore. If Liam's reflexes hadn't been spot-on, there was no doubt we never would have gotten out of the isolated cabin the guy had driven us to in the Mojave National Preserve. After that, we'd realized people just didn't do things for free or out of the goodness of their hearts.

Payment was always expected.

In some form or another.

I'd foolishly believed that money was still the most coveted form of currency when I'd tried to leave Liam at the truck stop.

Liam had paid the price for that mistake too.

It was really hard to write my next note because I could feel the blackness trying to steal my vision.

But I had to know the answer.

Do you hate me, Liam?

“What?” he croaked when he read my note. He actually put the coffee down and then grabbed me by the upper arms.

“Is that what you think?” he asked.

You got hurt because of me.

“I got hurt because I was outnumbered,” Liam growled. “And I could never hate you, Noah. I love you.”

My heart soared until he added the words, “You’re my brother.”

Right.

He loved me as if we actually shared blood. I was the little brother who needed looking out for and nothing more.

I pulled in a few breaths to try and calm myself. Liam’s declaration had actually made that darkness fade to the back for a second. Liam was still holding my upper arms. My skin burned where he was touching me and butterflies danced in my belly.

Like they had with Zak.

And Killian.

God, what kind of person did that make me? Not only was I lusting after my very straight brother, I couldn’t stop thinking about the two damaged men who’d given us refuge. I’d clearly made Killian uncomfortable the night before, and Zak had only needed comfort, but I hadn’t missed how good his body had felt against mine as he’d clung to me.

I was a perverted freak.

I pulled free of Liam and pretended I needed the distance to write another note.

Do you think we can help them?

When I handed the note to Liam, he was silent for a long time.

They need to talk to each other, Liam.

He took the second note and sighed. Before he could respond, we heard the tell-tale click-clack sound coming down the hallway toward our room.

No, not our room... I wasn’t allowed to think of it that way.

The guest room.

I couldn’t help but smile as the sound got closer. When I looked up at Liam, he was smiling too, and when his eyes met mine, I felt my stomach drop out.

He was so beautiful, it hurt to look at him sometimes. Even with the yellow and green bruises still marring his skin, I couldn’t take my eyes off him. His eyes were dancing just a bit... like they had in those few months

before he'd gone off to college. We'd had that entire summer to just hang out. He'd taught me how to surf and play football (well, he'd tried to teach me, anyway... I wasn't exactly coordinated) and I'd taken him to some of my favorite places like the Natural History Museum and the California Science Center.

I'd missed seeing him smile since then. Of watching that joy reach his eyes. He'd always put up a good front for me after we left home, but the few displays of humor and lightness had never reached his eyes.

Neither of us spoke until our self-appointed guard dog reached us. Waldo looked up at me expectantly. I leaned down and offered my arm. I snuggled him for a moment, then put him on the bed. He looked between me and Liam briefly, then hopped unevenly to the foot of the bed. By the time he'd taken up his perch on the footrail, Liam and I were both laughing, although mine was more of a strange wheezing sound.

When we settled, Liam lifted his hand to cup my cheek. I couldn't help but lean into his touch just a little.

Not enough for him to notice, though... hopefully. I didn't want to ruin the moment by making him uncomfortable.

"A few more days, Noah. That's assuming they're even okay with it. But then we have to go, okay?"

I nodded.

"Vermont is waiting for us, remember?"

I nodded again.

"You're going to love the snow. I'll teach you how to ski, and we'll get a little place that has a fireplace so we can have hot chocolate with marshmallows in it..."

I smiled encouragingly. I wanted to tell him I'd go anywhere he wanted me to, but all I wrote down on my note was, *I can't wait*.

Liam's Vermont dream had been the only thing that had sustained us in the past six months. It had given us something to focus on. It was "home" to us, even though I'd never set foot in the state or seen even a flake of snow before. Liam had, but his memories were based on a time in his life that had ended long ago. But we'd needed something to keep us going... to make it worth getting out of our cold sleeping bag every morning and ignoring the pangs of hunger in our bellies.

And Liam had needed it even more because he'd had to do things that I hadn't. It was something we never talked about... not since the time I'd

confronted him about it and he'd pretended to have no idea what I was talking about.

Like I'd told Zak, there were a lot of things Liam and I didn't talk about. I wondered if that meant we were on the same path as Zak and Killian. No, we weren't together like the two men, but I couldn't imagine a half-life with Liam if I were allowed to love him the way Zak loved Killian.

Who was I kidding?

Liam and I already had that life.

The only difference was that we weren't romantically involved.

Maybe that would be our saving grace and it would somehow be easier as the years went by. Maybe once we were in Vermont and Liam had his own family and I was pushed to the background as the doting uncle to his kids, then it wouldn't hurt so fucking much to look at him. And I wouldn't someday be forced to lean on a near stranger for support like Zak had.

I dropped my eyes to the bed as I wondered if it was wrong to think that Zak might not have leaned on just *anyone* this morning. Maybe it hadn't been about proximity... maybe... maybe he'd needed... *me*.

"Noah?"

Liam's voice was full of concern.

I quickly jotted a note down to make it look like that's where my thoughts had been... and not on something I shouldn't have been even considering.

Do you want me to make you something to eat?

I forced myself to look up as I gave him the note. He smiled.

His *real* Liam smile.

"Do they even have Pop-Tarts here?" Liam asked.

I smiled and gently pushed his shoulder, being careful not to cause him to strain his side.

It was a running joke between us because the summer we'd spent together, any time it'd been my turn to cook a meal, I'd made Pop-Tarts and nothing else. And it wasn't only because I loved the sweet treats.

Aunt Marjorie and Liam's dad had spent that entire summer on a private yacht in Europe somewhere, so Liam and I had been on our own. Liam had gotten so sick of Pop-Tarts that he'd taken over all the cooking within the first week.

I have a confession to make.

I handed him the note and waited until he'd read it before I started on the next one.

I do kind of know how to cook... I just hate it.

Liam's mouth moved as he read the words quietly to himself. I was so caught up in watching his lips that I wasn't prepared for when he grabbed me.

"You little faker," he growled in mock anger.

I tried to grab his arm so he wouldn't hurt his side, but before I knew it, I was lying beneath him. He winced a little, like he'd forgotten he was injured, and I quickly put my hand on his wounded ribs in the hopes that I could somehow ease the pain he was feeling.

He must have seen the concern in my eyes because he said, "Don't worry, Noah. It doesn't hurt that bad. Promise."

I wanted to ask him if he was sure, but it wasn't an option with him on top of me like he was.

That was when I truly became aware that he was *on top of me*.

There were plenty of times where he'd ended up lying on my chest during sleep, but what was happening now was different.

So very different.

Liam hovered above me as his eyes held mine. His shirt had ridden up just a little, so a couple of my fingers were touching his hot skin. One of his hands was planted on the bed next to my head. The other was on my side where he'd been pretending to tickle me.

There was no tickling now.

I began sucking in one breath after another as he just hung there, his eyes on my face.

Then my mouth.

God, just one kiss. That was all I needed. I was certain it would sustain me for the rest of my days.

That's how good it would be.

I began moving my hand lower so that I could touch more of his firm flesh. I swore he was breathing as hard as me. My hand was pretty much moving independent of my brain because the next thing I knew, my fingers were sliding over his hip. I wasn't sure what my goal was.

Yes I was.

I wanted more of his weight on me. I wanted to find a way to open my legs a little more so I could see how well he fit between them. I wanted to

know if his cock felt like mine. With just our pajama bottoms separating our bodies, surely I'd be able to tell if the hardness I was feeling against my thigh was what I was hoping it was.

Waldo's squawk and a creaking floorboard had Liam ripping his eyes from mine. I turned and followed the direction of his gaze and gasped when I saw Zak standing in the doorway.

"Fuck, sorry," he muttered, then he actually reached for the door like he was going to close it.

"No, wait," Liam said as he scrambled off me. He let out a groan and grabbed his side, but that didn't stop him from adding, "We were just fooling around... wrestling, I mean! We were wrestling... like brothers do!"

The desperation in his voice made something inside of me die. I carefully rolled away from him so I could sit up but not have to look at him. Zak was gone and the door was closed.

"Fuck," Liam whispered.

Liam swore a lot, but somehow the word made my skin crawl this time.

"Noah," Liam said as his hand settled on my back. I pulled away from him.

"Don't worry, Noah, I'll explain it to Zak. I'll tell him we were just playing around."

I wanted to return some snide comment about how he should go and do that, but I felt too ashamed to even look at him.

How the hell had I thought it might be something different than it was?

"Noah," Liam called, but I put out my hand to silence him, then went to the bathroom. I closed the door and locked it, then got the shower going. I waited until I was beneath the warm spray of water before I sank to my ass and used my hand to silence any of the sobs that I couldn't manage to keep from escaping my throat.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LIAM

I smiled to myself when several of the dogs lying around me in the kitchen suddenly jumped up and scampered out of the room. The two birds who could fly, Skittles and Blueberry, took off from their perch, and Waldo began squawking. I couldn't see him from my spot by the stove, but I knew his perch was closer to the ground and that he was already likely off it and headed for the front door. I'd seen the animals' antics a couple of times when Zak had come home from running errands in the last few days, but it still amused me to no end.

Fuck.

I'd said it again.

Home.

I really needed to quit doing that shit.

It was already bad enough that Noah and I were still staying at the old farmhouse in the countryside, but we were riding the edge of disaster by starting to get attached to not only all the animals, but the owners of the house as well.

Okay, it was more Zak than Killian, but that was only because Killian hadn't been around much.

I should have been fine with that fact, but it was killing Zak. And after the things I'd overheard him telling Noah the other morning, I understood why. I hadn't even been in the room, but I'd felt Zak's shame and pain. I'd wanted nothing more than to stride in the kitchen and take him in my arms and tell him he hadn't done anything wrong... that the stuff that had happened between him and Killian was fixable if they would each just open their fucking mouths and talk to each other.

Despite what I'd told Noah about not getting comfortable in this place, that's exactly what we were doing. Noah was completely better, and I was finally able to move around a little more easily. But instead of steeling ourselves for the cold familiarity of life on the move, every morning found us taking part in the "chores" we'd set for ourselves. Killian was always gone by the time we got up, but Zak was usually around. He'd only started going back to work that morning, so it'd been Noah's and my first day by ourselves in the rambling house. I'd made breakfast for Noah and Zak each morning while Noah helped Zak feed the animals. Noah then mysteriously disappeared for much of the day in a room that Zak had said was Killian's office. I'd finally peeked in on my brother this afternoon, only to see him poring over Killian's sketchpad. Waldo usually spent the day with Noah, no matter what he was doing. I, myself, started doing some cleaning around the house, more as an excuse to stick around "just one more day" than anything else. Zak had told me repeatedly that I didn't have to do any of that, but the work relaxed me, much like cooking did. I just had to take it slow because of my ribs.

"Oh, hey," I heard Killian say. I'd already turned so my back was to the kitchen entrance because I didn't quite trust myself not to lay into the man. Since the morning Zak had opened up to Noah, Killian hadn't come home until late in the evenings, usually well after Zak had gone up to bed.

I knew that because, to my own horror, Noah and I had spent the last couple of evenings watching TV in the den with Zak. But while Zak had stayed in the room with us, he hadn't really been there. He'd stared at the TV but hadn't actually been watching it. Instead, he'd checked his watch every few minutes and by the time the evening news had come on, he'd excused himself for bed, saying he was tired. I only knew that Killian eventually came home because I saw the headlights shine briefly through the curtains each night while Noah and I were lying in bed.

Killian was fucking breaking the man's heart and he didn't even seem to notice or care.

Of course, it wasn't like Noah and I were doing much better. We obviously weren't in a relationship, but it still felt like something had shifted between us. Noah seemed eager to escape my presence whenever possible. Even at night, he wouldn't lie in my arms like he always had in the past. Yeah, he'd end up curled against me by morning, but as soon as he was awake, he was pushing away from me and getting out of bed.

He and Zak seemed to be getting along more than I would have expected. It should have made me jealous, but for some reason, it didn't. I liked seeing Noah relax and fit in for a change. He loved interacting with the animals, and Zak was good at picking up on the things Noah didn't say. The part that should have been more disturbing, but oddly wasn't, was the chemistry I was seeing between the two men. They never acted on it, of course, but I couldn't deny that sometimes when they looked at each other or inadvertently touched one another, something would flare to life between them. My dirty mind started conjuring up mental images of the two men locked in a heated embrace rather than turning away from each other in shame like they always did.

The whole thing was fucking with my head, especially when it came to Noah.

I had no clue if he was gay or not, but I also hadn't really ever allowed myself to consider it because he was my little brother and my job was to look out for him, not fantasize about him.

I *did* fantasize about him, but before, there'd always been this impossibility of things happening to tone down my fantasies. Watching him with Zak had not only ratcheted those fantasies to a whole new level, it'd given me this weird hope that maybe someday things could be different between us.

Only, if Noah did play for my team, it seemed like I might have missed the boat. And I hadn't exactly been forthcoming about my own sexuality.

I didn't answer Killian, but I could hear him moving around behind me. A moment later, he was at my side as he began rinsing his travel mug out in the sink.

"Where's Zak?" he asked.

"Like you care," I snapped before I could stop myself.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Killian's fingers stop cleaning the cup for a second. I inwardly cursed myself, then turned my back on him and went to the island so I could continue chopping the vegetables.

"You want to explain that little remark?"

I could tell he hadn't moved from his spot. It felt like his eyes were burning a hole in my back.

"You're a smart guy, Killian. Even for a cop," I added snidely, even though my gut was telling me not to push the man.

I'd kind of freaked out at first when I'd heard Killian used to be a cop, but after Zak had continued his story the other morning, I'd realized that the possibility of Killian finding out about what had happened back home before Noah and I had left would be slim. Chances were, my father hadn't even reported anything to the cops.

Noah and I had left town anyway, just to be on the safe side. But that'd been six months ago. If anything, Spencer Savage had already forgotten he even had a son.

The reminder of what my father had done made me feel sick and my knees suddenly felt weak.

"Whoa, hold on there," Killian said, and I didn't realize until his hands went under my armpits that I'd been losing my battle with staying on my feet. Next thing I knew, I was sitting in one of the kitchen chairs watching Killian turn off the burner for the pan of chicken I'd been searing.

"Here," Killian said as he brought me a bottle of water.

Didn't the fucker realize I was trying to be pissed at him? How was that supposed to work when all he was doing was being nice?

Asshole.

I'd said the comment under my breath, but apparently not softly enough because Killian sighed and murmured, "Yeah, I am." I watched him walk to the window that overlooked the back yard and the small barn where Killian and Zak housed several horses and a few other livestock.

"Then fucking change it," I muttered as I took a sip of the water. I forced thoughts of the past and my father out of my head.

"So he told you, huh?" Killian said. His voice was soft as he continued to stare out the window. I figured he could probably see his lover and my brother doing the chores out there. Would he see the same thing I had?

"He told Noah," I said. "I just happened to overhear."

Killian didn't respond at first. Finally, he said, "When I met him, it was like God had finally taken pity on me. I was so worried I'd fuck it up. You should have seen him, Liam. His smile... it just lit up the fucking room. I knew right then he was mine. I just had to make him see it."

Killian's voice was soft and reminiscent.

"How did you meet?" I asked.

"Bar. Super Bowl Sunday. We ended up in the bathroom by the last quarter. By the time the game was over, we were already back at my place

and I was trying to figure out how to keep him there. Fast and hard... that was how everything went for us.”

I felt a shiver go down my spine when Killian glanced at me.

“Wouldn’t have had it any other way,” he added. He stepped away from the window and stopped at the cutting board I’d been using. I watched him pick up the knife I’d been chopping vegetables with. He took over the task for me, though I had a feeling it had more to do with him wanting to keep his own hands busy.

“How long have you been together?”

“Seven years.”

“And you were a cop,” I prodded.

“SWAT,” Killian said. “My dad was a cop, his dad was a cop, uncles were cops...”

“Family business,” I murmured.

“Family dream,” Killian corrected as he shot me a glance. “Even after my parents kicked me out, I never took my eyes off the prize, you know?”

“Why’d they kick you out?”

Killian tilted his head at me.

“Because you were gay,” I murmured.

“Oldest story in the book,” Killian said. “They found some magazines in my closet, told me I was going to hell, no son of theirs, yada, yada, yada. I tried ‘changing,’ but a crush on the son of my father’s partner on the force ended that. We got caught giving each other hand jobs in my room one day. Little shit blamed it all on me. My dad gave me five minutes to pack my shit.”

“Where did you go?”

“Stayed with friends or guys I fucked until I could afford to get my own place. Moved to Philadelphia and joined the police academy.”

Some of my anger toward Killian began to die down as I watched him hack away at the vegetables. I got up and went to him, then covered his hand on the knife with mine. “Like this,” I said as I showed him how to evenly cut the vegetables. I suspected the amount of focus he’d need to cut them more precisely would help him calm down a bit.

It’d always worked for me.

I went to the drawer and got another knife and stood next to him as I diced tomatoes.

“Was it everything you’d hoped it would be?” I asked. “Being a cop?”

Killian nodded. "After I got kicked out, I figured if I was going to start a new life, maybe I should do something else for a living. I mean, it'd been drilled into my head from the time I was old enough to walk that I was going to be a cop."

"You had to make sure that it was what you really wanted."

Killian nodded again. "I worked odd jobs and audited a couple of college classes to see if anything would cause that same spark of fire deep in my belly."

"But it didn't happen," I ventured.

Killian paused and looked at me. He seemed a little calmer. "No. You?" he asked.

I knew what he was asking me.

"College football," I said. "I had big plans... college ball, NFL, endorsements..."

"You did?" he asked. "Or someone else did?"

I shook my head. Damn, the guy really was a cop. "My dad. I thought I wanted the same things, but..."

"No spark," Killian supplied and then went back to chopping.

"No," I murmured. "So you were a cop when you met Zak."

"Yep. He was in nursing school. He'd just finished his second deployment. He'd been a combat medic in his unit—"

"Wait, Zak was in the military?" I asked.

"Marines," Killian confirmed.

"Fuck," I muttered to myself as I remembered how I'd attacked Zak in the hospital room. "I just assumed that because he was a nurse—"

"Yeah," Killian said with a grin. "A lot of people do that – underestimate him. Whatever you did to him, you're lucky he didn't break something."

I felt my cheeks heat as I thought about the things I'd said to Zak in that hospital room.

"Anyway, he loved the military, but the war was hard on him. He was always meant to save lives, not take them."

I nodded. I could definitely see that about Zak. When Killian didn't continue, I said, "Zak said he insisted you give up being a cop. He said some stuff happened and you guys went through a tough time."

Killian stilled. I could see his hand was trembling. I covered it with mine. "Keep cutting, Killian. It helps."

He looked at me, his beautiful brown eyes awash with torment. His gaze returned to the potato he'd been cutting. He sucked in a breath and began slicing the vegetable into impossibly thin slices. I didn't need the potato cut that thin for the meal I was planning, but it had stopped being about the food a while ago.

Part of me didn't want to push Killian, but my gut was telling me that his version of events was very different from Zak's and *that* was what was keeping them from talking.

"I had a case that went bad. A kid... a kid died," Killian said softly. "He was only fifteen. I was forced to... to..."

Killian shook his head.

"It's okay," I whispered.

"Things changed. *I* changed," Killian said. "I started taking risks I shouldn't have. At work. At home. I was angry too... really angry. When I wasn't working, I started drinking. My department sent me to talk to a shrink about the shooting, but I wasn't interested. I went because I had to, but I said everything the doctor wanted me to. It was all bullshit. The kid was dead and talking about it wasn't going to bring him back or make it okay."

I was on the verge of saying that whatever had happened that'd forced him to kill the teenager hadn't been his fault, but then I realized that was the last thing he needed to hear. In fact, he didn't need to hear anything at the moment. So I kept my mouth shut and slowly cut the tomato up.

"One day at work, I broke protocol and went into a house without waiting for my team. I got shot in the chest. The bullet was an armor piercing one, so my vest only slowed it down. Zak was working in the ER I was taken to. I didn't have a pulse when they rolled me in. I was in a coma for three days. When I woke up, Zak was sitting next to my bed. I'd never... I'd never seen him look like that."

Killian stopped slicing and stared at the cutting board beneath his fingers. I gently eased the knife from his hand because I knew he wasn't seeing it anymore. He was seeing Zak, however he'd looked that fateful day.

"I did that to him," he murmured. "I was a selfish fuck." Killian looked at his hands. "When he asked me to give up the force and move out of the city, I agreed. It wasn't even something I needed to think about. I knew if I didn't, I'd lose him. He'd always feared getting that call that I was gone, so

to see me come into that ER and actually *be* gone... to be the one who had to fight like hell to bring me back... saying ‘yes’ to him was one of the easiest things I’ve ever done.”

“He says he made you give up your dream.”

Killian shook his head. “*He* was my dream. Still is. This life,” – Killian looked around the kitchen– “this is my dream. But I fucked that up too.”

“You started drinking more,” I suggested.

“Morning, noon, and night. Zak got a job at the hospital out here pretty fast, but I was struggling to find work since all I knew how to be was a cop. I started working on the house, fixing it up and stuff. It was easy enough to have a drink after lunch and another before Zak got home. Then a few in the morning after he left. Then a few more to wake me up... some to help me sleep. Zak was working double shifts to support us and I was drinking his paychecks away. He asked me to get help a few times, but it wasn’t until he packed up my stuff and put it on the front porch that I got the message. It was the second time I broke him,” Killian whispered.

I wanted to respond, but Zak and Noah chose that moment to walk through the back door. Zak was smiling as he said, “And then Killian stepped in Nana’s—”

Noah was smiling too, but the second the pair saw Killian, Zak snapped his mouth shut and Noah dropped his eyes.

“You’re home,” Zak said in surprise.

“Yeah,” Killian murmured. “But I can’t stay.” He abruptly stepped back from the island and went to the sink to wash his hands.

“Liam’s making us dinner. Are you sure you can’t—” Zak began to say hopefully as he took a few steps forward. The big lab, Bentley, began whining nervously as he ambled back and forth between Killian and Zak.

“No,” Killian cut in. A few minutes ago, I would have gone off on him, but now that I understood more of where his head was at, I held my tongue. Both men were blaming themselves for all that had happened in their relationship, and the silence had become such a coping mechanism for both of them that part of me wondered if they’d even be able to get past it. Maybe it wasn’t as simple as them “talking” anymore.

I saw Noah move a little closer to Zak as Zak’s face fell. My brother’s eyes shifted to me pleadingly.

But the conversation with Killian had opened my eyes in more ways than one.

Noah and I *were* becoming too comfortable around the men. What was worse, though, was that I suspected we might be part of the rift that seemed to be growing between them every day.

“Um, since you guys are both here, I just wanted to let you know that Noah and I are leaving tomorrow.”

“What?” Killian asked in surprise, but my eyes were on Noah. My heart clenched when I saw him reach for Zak’s hand. Zak actually squeezed my brother’s fingers before both men seemed to realize what they were doing and released each other. Noah took a step backward until his back hit the door. He shook his head at me, but otherwise didn’t make a sound.

He didn’t need to.

I could see in his eyes what he would have said if he could have.

I don’t want to go.

And that was exactly why we needed to leave.

Because despite my suspicions that Noah and I were adding another layer to Zak and Killian’s problems, *I* didn’t really want to go, either.

PART V

Killian & Zak

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ZAK

I found Noah in the very stall we'd been working in before we'd left to return to the house. He was sitting with his back against the wall, knees pulled up and his face buried against his legs. I'd already heard him sobbing when I'd entered the barn.

I'd expected Liam to be the one to chase after him when he'd run out of the house following Liam's surprise announcement, but Liam hadn't done anything more than harden his jaw and continue to make dinner as if he'd just announced what the weather would be like rather than something so important.

The idea of the two young men back out on the streets terrified me. I'd tried to talk to Noah a couple times over the past few days about what had happened to the brothers to cause them to live the life they were, but he always shut down when I brought it up.

Not that he really "talked" to me.

But I'd started figuring out how to pick up on the cues from his eyes and body.

And I'd learned quite a bit.

First off, he loved our animals. He couldn't walk past any of them and not give them cuddles. Waldo and Nana, predictably, seemed to be a little extra special to him, but even Boris, our very overweight and foul-smelling pig, got hugs from the young man. The past couple of nights as we'd sat watching television, Noah had been constantly cuddling whichever animal would seek out his lap for their turn of his attention.

Second, Noah spoke volumes if you knew how to read him. His emotions were there for anyone to see if they just looked hard enough and

didn't dismiss his silence as part of his personality. In the handful of hours I'd spent one on one with him since the morning I'd laid my soul open to him after confronting Killian about his empty liquor bottle, Noah had interacted with me on many levels. He'd listened, asked questions using a notepad and pen he'd taken to carrying around on him, smiled, and even laughed. And I'd had an amazing time getting to know him. He was sweet, patient, and kind, but he also had a certain fierceness about him that I could sense just beneath the surface.

Thirdly, and this had been probably the most confusing for me emotionally speaking, Noah was most definitely in love with his stepbrother.

And his stepbrother didn't seem to notice.

It was the most frustrating thing to watch because it was so obvious to me, but Liam was clearly oblivious that Noah wanted him. If that weren't bad enough, those emotions clearly went both ways and neither saw it. The longing they had for one another was like a fucking beacon, but they still teetered around each other like one wrong word or touch would shatter the comfort zone that was separating them like a pane of glass.

Of course, it had to be even more complicated because life seemed to enjoy fucking with my head at the worst possible times.

While my relationship with Killian was disintegrating before my very eyes, I was caught up in how good being around Liam and Noah made me feel. I tried to tell myself I was just rooting for them to get together out of some need to mend my own rift with Killian, but I knew deep down that wasn't completely true.

I was attracted to both young men.

Individually.

And when they were together.

To this day, I couldn't get the image of Liam lying on top of Noah out of my head. Liam had tried to reassure me the next day that he and his stepbrother had only been joking around, but what I'd seen hadn't had anything to do with brotherly affection and roughhousing. There'd been a distance between the two young men ever since that day, but whenever I saw them together, I couldn't help but imagine them locked in a passionate embrace as Killian and I watched.

Or joined in.

Who was I kidding?

Killian would have to be *around* to join in.

I pushed my own distress aside as I entered Nana's stall. The mini was ignoring the dinner we'd just fed her so that she could nuzzle Noah's face.

"Noah," I said softly as I sat down next to him.

I rubbed his back. I liked that he didn't pull away from me. The more time we'd spent together, the freer he'd been with touching me. But I hadn't realized until he'd reached for my hand in the kitchen and I'd automatically taken it that we'd somehow progressed to a level of intimacy that was off limits. The move hadn't been sexual, and nothing between us had been, but that didn't matter much when we were seeking comfort in each other rather than the men we should have been reaching for.

"Noah, it'll be okay," I said.

Noah shook his head. He leaned back and wiped at his wet face. His tears came along with little hiccupping sounds. I rubbed his knee as he quickly wrote something down on his notepad and handed me the whole thing.

They'll hurt him again.

"Liam?" I asked. "Someone will hurt Liam again?"

Noah nodded emphatically.

"Do you mean whoever beat him up?" I asked. "Do you know who it was? Are they after you and Liam?"

The young man began sobbing again. I turned him into me and put my hand along the back of his neck like I'd seen Liam do. I was hoping the move would keep Noah from losing it completely. His panic attacks were scary to witness, though I'd only seen them occur after he was woken up from a nightmare.

Noah's fingers curled into my shirt as he cried his heart out. He felt so small and broken against me.

"Stubborn little bastard," I heard Killian mutter as he entered the barn. Noah jumped in my arms and tried to scramble away from me, but I refused to let him go.

"Zak?"

"In here," I responded softly. When Killian appeared at the half-door of Nana's stall, he was still muttering something under his breath. He fell silent when he saw me and Noah.

I knew there was a possibility he could read the wrong thing into the way I was holding Noah, but I doubted it. And if he did, then it would be

just another thing to add onto the pile of shit we couldn't manage to wade through. I wasn't going to abandon the distraught young man.

Killian quietly entered the stall. He went to Noah's other side and gently urged Nana out of her spot. The mini obliged him and went to stand at Noah's feet instead.

"Noah, you okay?" Killian asked.

Noah didn't respond at first. A couple moments passed before he straightened himself and reached for the notepad I was still holding. He turned the page and wrote something else, then handed it to Killian.

I saw what it said.

Please, Killian, make him stay.

Not us, but him.

Killian's face fell as he read the note. "I'm sorry, Noah, I tried talking to him but he's refusing to speak to me..."

Noah's hopeful expression slipped away. He dropped his eyes so he was staring at the floor of the stall. I saw Killian flip the page on the notepad to the previous one. His eyes hardened as he read it, then he looked at me questioningly.

I shook my head.

"Noah, can you tell us who hurt Liam?" he asked.

The young man began shaking his head, then stilled, like he was lost in thought. He reached for the pad and then wrote something down on it. He handed it to Killian, then wiped his face. Killian's expression went dark at whatever he read. When he handed the notepad to me, I felt my heart clench at the words.

I did. I hurt Liam.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

KILLIAN

Zak and I were finally in the same room for more than five minutes and I still couldn't find the fucking words to tell him how sorry I was for fucking everything up so badly.

Again.

Why the fuck couldn't I just get my shit together and stop hurting him?

My conversation with Liam while we'd been cutting vegetables had left me feeling raw and exposed, but instead of doing what I should have done and talked to Zak about it, I'd let the fear and shame drive me to seek escape wherever I could.

I was going to lose him.

I knew that.

There was no other possible outcome. Zak deserved better. He deserved a man who wasn't afraid to admit that demons still haunted him... not a coward who chose to hide instead.

"Zak—"

"No, Killian," Zak whispered as he rubbed his hands together. We were sitting in the living room.

Me on the chair, him on the couch. We'd picked the room because we knew it would serve the dual purpose of being able to keep an eye out for Noah at the same time that we confronted Liam. It wasn't completely dark out, but it'd been almost an hour since we'd returned to the house. Liam hadn't been in the kitchen anymore. All the burners on the stove had been turned off and the cut-up vegetables packed away.

It'd taken us that long to try and get Noah to explain his cryptic statement, but he'd gone completely silent and had ignored our attempts to

urge him to write us more notes. The only time he'd reacted had been when I'd suggested that Noah not go with Liam when he left. I hadn't even gotten to finish my argument that I believed Liam wouldn't leave if Noah stayed behind because the young man had become so upset that he'd nearly had a full-on panic attack. Thankfully, Zak had been able to calm him down.

"You don't get to give up on us," he muttered. "Not like this."

His words should have been encouraging, but they just broke my heart even more. How long would Zak wait for me to get my shit together? How many wounds would he let me inflict upon his heart before he said it was enough?

"I've been talking to Delia about—" I began, but the sound of Liam's voice cut me off.

"Noah?"

His voice was a hushed whisper. Zak and I were sitting in the living room with all the lights turned out except one. We'd started leaving at least one light on in each room at night so that Noah wouldn't get scared if he needed to get up and get something to drink or come find one of us.

Well, Zak.

Because I hadn't been around.

And if I had, I was hiding out in my office going through the notes Noah and I had been exchanging back and forth in my sketchbook. After I'd realized he'd made modifications to my designs for Waldo's new beak, I'd started asking him questions via the sketchpad and leaving it on his nightstand each night. The following night when I got home, I'd find it in my office, the questions answered. I'd also noticed that the browser history on my computer had shown that Noah had used the internet to research some of the materials we were looking at to use for the next version of Waldo's beak, and several of the sites had been bookmarked for me.

"Noah," Liam called as he entered the dim room. I felt my anger kick in when I saw a plastic bag in his hand. If it contained what I thought it did...

I watched Liam turn and head back out of the living room, probably to search the back of the house for Noah. I flicked on the light next to me. I was glad when Liam only slightly winced as he turned around. It meant his ribs were on the mend.

But I was still pissed that he was so eager to go back to living on the streets that had nearly killed him.

“He’s upstairs,” I said. “In Zak’s and my room,” I added. I wasn’t surprised when Liam’s expression fell. But while I’d been expecting the disappointment, I’d also thought there’d be some jealous anger there. I’d figured he’d verbally attack us, or at least me, for the supposed moves we’d put on Noah.

Which, of course, we hadn’t.

We’d had a hell of a time convincing Noah to lie down in our bed and get some rest while Zak and I dealt with Liam. I suspected it was only Noah’s fear of Liam getting hurt again that’d had him agreeing at all.

“Come sit,” I said.

Liam’s silent refusal *didn’t* surprise me. He crossed his arms in front of his body and didn’t move even an inch.

“What’s in the bag?” I asked.

Silence. Zak was watching Liam over his shoulder.

“We offered to let Noah stay, even if you left,” I said casually.

Liam’s expression faltered for about three seconds, before he shrugged his shoulders. “Good, he’ll be safer here with you.” He turned to leave.

“He left you a note,” I called just as Liam was about to walk out of the living room. He stiffened, then turned slowly.

“What did it say?” he asked.

“Come see for yourself,” I said as I motioned to the coffee table. I had a view of the stairs from my position. Fortunately, I didn’t see Noah on them. Not only would Liam’s quick dismissal have hurt Noah like hell, I doubted he would have let his brother actually leave without him.

Liam looked warily at me, then Zak. Zak turned around. He was sitting in the middle of the couch looking very tense. When I’d told Noah that he could stay even if Liam didn’t, Zak hadn’t said anything, and I’d known why.

He’d wanted it to be my decision to invite Liam and Noah to stay with us for a while longer.

I might not have been around the past few days, but it had been a comfort to know that Zak wasn’t alone.

Zak hated being alone.

Even if he hadn’t been a natural people person, his shitty childhood had pretty much guaranteed that he’d always have to deal with the idea of being abandoned by the people who were supposed to care about him the most.

But that same childhood had left Zak mistrusting of others. So life had become a big Catch-22 for him. Finding people he didn't have to worry about leaving him behind was hard for Zak. When he did find someone who earned his love and loyalty, he gave it one hundred and fifty percent. I'd sworn to him and myself that I'd never give him cause to doubt his gift to me, but that was all I'd been doing for the past eighteen months.

My heart was heavy as I watched Liam debate whether or not to move closer to us. I knew his desperation would win out, and while I hated using his need for Noah against him, I wasn't going to pussyfoot around this thing. I'd learned pretty quickly that Liam was a stubborn son of a bitch and when he wrapped his mind around something, that was it. I wasn't sure why he'd insisted on all of a sudden leaving, but I was damn well going to find out.

For him.

For Zak... and Noah.

For me.

I might not have understood or anticipated the impact of Noah and Liam's presence on Zak's and my life, but I wasn't going to let them leave in the hopes that things between me and Zak might go back to "normal."

Normal hadn't been working for us.

Liam finally began moving closer to us. I saw his eyes drift to the stairs. I could only imagine what was going through his head as he imagined *his* Noah in *our* bed. The fact that he wasn't raging about us supposedly taking advantage of the younger man was proof enough of where his head was at.

Liam cautiously stepped past Zak on the couch. He seemed to think Zak or I were going to try and grab him or something because he kept shifting his eyes between us, and I could see his fingers flexing in anticipation.

Such a fighter.

Noah was damn lucky to have Liam in his corner.

"Over there," I said as I motioned to the notes that I'd laid on the table in the order Noah had written them. The top one was the one that talked about Liam getting hurt again.

Liam hung there as he stared at the note. His fingers shook as he reached for the little pile. The plastic bag he'd been holding, which I could see had his and Noah's pajamas and a few of the toiletries we'd given them in it, slipped to the crook of his elbow as he switched the notes so he could read the second one.

I swore I heard Liam whimper as he read his stepbrother's plea to me to make Liam stay. The last note, the one about Noah being the one who'd hurt him, had Liam sinking to the couch next to Zak.

"No," he whispered. "It wasn't his fault."

"What happened?" I asked.

"He... he had it in his head that he was the reason things had turned out like they had," Liam murmured. "He said we should separate... that I'd be better off on my own."

I saw Liam wipe briefly at his eyes. I didn't see tears, but I knew that didn't mean they weren't there.

"I got angry with him for suggesting that. I told him not to ever bring it up again... that we were brothers and we stick together... always."

Zak was staring at the floor as Liam spoke. He was rubbing his hands together nervously. I knew that meant he was feeling helpless. Despite everything Zak had been through, he was a demonstrative person with those he trusted. His need to touch Liam was clear as day and I couldn't help but wonder if he was refraining for my sake more than Liam's.

"He didn't mention it again, so I thought he'd given up on the idea. It was a few weeks ago when we talked about it." Liam's voice cracked a bit here and there. "I, um, was in the bathroom at this truck stop. We'd hitched a ride up from Pittsburgh."

"Where were you headed?" I asked.

Liam shook his head. "The truck driver was headed north so that's the way we went. We're going to Vermont but we grab rides with guys who... who..."

Liam hesitated, then dropped his face to his hands. "Fuck," he whispered, his voice finally breaking. Zak looked at me helplessly and I quickly nodded. I wanted to tell him there was no need for him to ask my permission to be who he was, but I knew why he was doing it.

He'd clearly developed some kind of bond with both young men, and that was making him feel guilty.

I didn't allow myself to consider how deep that bond might have grown in the short time I'd been absent from the house.

Zak moved closer to Liam but didn't touch him. Their thighs were brushing one another, but that was it.

"I picked guys who I thought I could handle if they got aggressive," Liam finally said.

It took me a moment to pick up on the way he said “aggressive.” When things began clicking in my head, my gut sank. I’d already suspected some of the things Liam and Noah might have had to do to survive living on the streets, but I hadn’t let my mind dwell on the fact. I could see Zak had connected the dots because he lifted his hand to run his fingers through his hair over and over again.

Another nervous habit for him.

“The guy was planning to head to Erie after a stop in Clarion. So we rode with him until just outside Clarion. Noah and I were eating in the diner of this truck stop when this other guy started chatting us up. I... I figured he’d be our next ride, so I told Noah I’d be right back and went to the bathroom. The guy, he, uh...”

Liam shook his head. “We were in the bathroom for a few minutes,” he said after a moment. “When he was done, I went to get Noah to tell him I’d found us another ride, but Noah wasn’t there.” Liam drew in a sharp breath. “I panicked because he knew better than to leave a public area while I was... while I... when I wasn’t with him.”

Liam was staring at the floor as he spoke. I leaned forward because I felt like I was going to be sick. I’d heard countless stories of kids getting taken advantage of when they became desperate for money, and it always broke my fucking heart, but hearing it from Liam made me want to get up and break something.

Preferably the necks of all the men who’d ever dared to lay a hand on him.

“You found him,” Zak said gently as his eyes met mine. I could see the rage he was feeling, but he was much better at masking it in his voice than I would have been.

Liam nodded. “He was with the guy who’d given us the ride to Clarion... *and* a few of his friends. I knew the fucker had wanted Noah from the start, but when I’d told him it was me or nothing, he’d agreed... I didn’t tell Noah because I didn’t want to scare him. He must have thought the guy was safe enough... or he was *that* desperate to get away from me.”

Liam said the last part so low that I barely heard him. I ended up being the one to touch him first by putting my hand on his knee. “I don’t fucking believe that for a second,” I said, a bit too angrily. I curled my fingers around Liam’s knee. “These notes,” – I snatched up the notes that Liam had

let fall to the floor at some point – “prove that he only wants to protect you the same way you’ve protected him.”

Liam shook his head. “I didn’t,” he croaked. “I didn’t fucking protect him! I left him in that house! Two years. I had no fucking idea I’d left him with a monster—”

“Who?” Zak cut in.

“No one,” Liam snapped suddenly. I could see the shift in his brain as his fear warred with his inability to trust. Liam jumped to his feet. “I have to go!”

Zak quickly stood to block Liam’s exit and when he turned to go around the other side of the couch, I was there to cut him off. I was ready for when Liam went on the attack. When he tried to shove past me, I grabbed his upper arms to stop him.

“Let me go,” Liam growled.

“What’s the plan, Liam?” I asked as I tried to keep my hold on him firm enough to prevent him from getting away from me but not hurt him in the process. “You’re just going to abandon Noah without even saying goodbye? Then what? You go find some fucker who will take your body in trade for a goddamn ride?”

“It’s worked so far, asshole,” Liam said coldly.

I watched his vulnerability and hurt slip away until he was someone I didn’t recognize.

He was the guy who let guys fuck him in dirty bathrooms for a few bucks or a meal or a ride or whatever he needed to keep his stepbrother alive.

My eyes were locked with Liam’s as I said to Zak, “Zak, go get Noah so he can say goodbye to his brother.”

Just like that, the switch inside Liam flipped back. “What? No!” Liam cried out. He twisted in my hold so he could look at Zak over his shoulder. “Don’t, Zak! Please, don’t!”

The desperation in Liam’s voice cut me to the core. “Zak, please, you know he’s better off here. I know you care about him.” Liam looked back at me. “I know you both do. He’s smart, Killian. Really smart... he just needs a little time to...”

The tears Liam had been working so hard to quell suddenly began streaming down his face. “Please, Killian. Please don’t do this.”

Liam stopped fighting me and just held himself stiffly as he stared at my chest. I slid my hand to the back of his neck so I could force his eyes up to mine. I was trying to get past the emotion in my own throat when Liam added, "If it's an issue of money, I can—"

"Don't you fucking dare," I growled as I pulled him forward. "Don't you fucking dare, Liam."

I had him practically flush against my body. Liam was shaking like a leaf and struggling to pull in one breath after another. He felt cold against me. His blue eyes were bright with emotion once again.

And something else.

When he dropped his gaze and stared at my throat, my eyes met Zak's over Liam's shoulder. At some point, he'd moved so he was standing just inches from Liam. I wanted to send him a silent apology for how intimate my embrace with Liam must seem, but the reality was that it was *intimate*.

Not sexual.

Intimate.

And that made it almost worse.

I started to shake my head at Zak and loosened my grip on Liam, but then Zak stepped forward so that his body was enveloping Liam's from behind. One of Zak's hands closed around my elbow. His other ended up on Liam's waist.

My heart practically exploded when I saw him silently mouth *I love you* to me. Then he dropped his head and whispered something into Liam's ear. Liam closed his eyes and let out a harsh sob. Sob after sob racked his long, lean body. When his forehead dropped to my chest and he relaxed completely against me, I lifted a hand to place on the back of his head.

"He's safe, Liam," I murmured. "You *did* keep him safe."

Liam began crying harder. His arms went around me, his fingers digging almost painfully into my back. As I held him, Zak held both of us. When Liam settled a few minutes later, I said, "Tell us who hurt Noah."

"My father," Liam said without hesitation. He sounded tired and just completely broken.

"How did he hurt him?" Zak asked.

Part of me didn't want to know because I was already battling the urge to unleash some pain on the people who'd hurt the two young men.

"He was always a bully," Liam said. "But I was used to it. Noah wasn't. He'd say stuff to Noah here and there about why he wouldn't talk and how

embarrassing it was. Noah's aunt never stuck up for him. I tried to whenever I heard him saying shit, but then I went off to college. Noah never said anything about how bad things had gotten. I never saw any bruises on him and my dad never hit me, so I thought... I thought maybe things had gotten better and Dad was just ignoring Noah. I was... I was making plans to have Noah move to Ohio with me after he graduated high school last spring. I'd had him apply to the school. My dad never adopted Noah, so he qualified for financial aid and scholarships. I noticed a change in Noah after New Year's. He was quieter than usual... I mean, he never talked about himself or anything, but he seemed excited about our plans. I decided to go home for spring break instead of to Florida with some friends like I'd planned. I wanted to surprise Noah with a road trip."

"What happened?" I asked.

"I thought my dad was yelling at Noah's aunt at first. Marjorie. They'd been fighting more and more. I didn't understand what they were doing in my room, though. Then I heard him talking about Marjorie and I realized it wasn't her he was yelling at. He said something about Marjorie fucking some other guy and how she married my dad for his money. I could tell my dad had been drinking just from the way he was talking. But I... I still didn't connect the dots. I actually thought he might be talking to himself. Then I heard him say, 'Maybe if I fuck you, I'll get my money's worth. Would you like that, queer?'"

Liam pressed his forehead against mine. "By the time I got in there, he had Noah bent over my desk, his pants down, and he was unzipping his own pants." Liam let out a sob. "Noah was crying but he didn't make a sound. Not one fucking sound."

Liam broke down completely and sagged against me. Between me and Zak, I suspected we were the only things keeping him upright.

"What happened after that?" Zak asked gently.

"I pulled him off Noah and then I started hitting him. Over and over... I never wanted to stop."

I didn't blame Liam. I doubted I would have been able to show any kind of restraint at all.

"Noah pulled me off him. My dad was still conscious, but he was covered in blood... he started saying how he was going to call the cops and have us both arrested. My only thought was to get Noah out of there. We didn't even stay long enough for him to get his stuff... we just ran. I didn't

have a car and by the time I thought to get to an ATM and withdraw money from the checking account my dad had given me, it was too late. He'd already blocked the account. I had enough money to get us a cheap hotel room in L.A. but that was it."

"What about Noah?" I asked.

"He was a mess. It took hours just to get him to even acknowledge me. I wanted to take him to a hospital, but he refused. I asked him if my dad had done that to him before and he swore to me he hadn't. That he'd just pushed him around and stuff... said mean things. But that he'd never tried to hurt him like that."

"Is that when he stopped talking?" Zak asked.

Liam shook his head. "No, that happened when he was a kid. I overheard his aunt telling my dad that Noah stopped talking after his dad was killed. He was a doctor with some kind of missionary group. They lived in a remote part of South Africa for Noah's whole life. Noah was just a regular kid up until the night his dad died, I guess. A teacher let it slip to our class that Noah's mutism was caused by a traumatic event or something."

"Selective mutism," Zak said.

Liam nodded. He eased back from me a bit. I was glad he'd calmed down, but I found that I was having trouble completely letting him go. Zak gave him a bit of space, but I noticed he too kept his body in contact with Liam's.

"His aunt said she took him to a few doctors at first but when he didn't get better, she gave up on it. He... he has trouble writing certain things down, too. If it has anything to do with himself, it's like he's mute then too. He's so smart though... like genius kind of smart. And he's so sweet and gentle. He doesn't deserve to be out there living like we do. I tried to get jobs, but the money just didn't stretch far enough and there were days that I knew he was hungrier than he let on and we always have to be watching our backs..."

Liam grew more and more agitated as he spoke.

"I couldn't protect him. If someone in the diner hadn't called the cops at that truck stop, that guy would have taken him from me—"

"Shhh," I said. "You *did* protect him. He's here and he's safe because of you."

“No,” Liam bit out impatiently as he pulled free of me. “He’s here and he’s safe because of you and Zak! But he was getting too attached! And I’m such a selfish fuck that I didn’t want to lose him, so I said we needed to leave. And I know we’re part of the reason you two aren’t speaking to each other.”

“Liam—” Zak began, but Liam cut him off.

“Don’t deny it, Zak! I’ve seen it. You guys have so much fucking shit you need to say to each other, but you just won’t talk! Do you know how lucky you are?” Liam growled as he looked at me. “How lucky you *both* are? To have found each other?” He looked over his shoulder at Zak. “And what, you’re going to throw it all away because you each feel so guilty for hurting the other?”

Liam dropped his eyes and shook his head slowly. “What I wouldn’t give to have what you guys have here. To have it with...”

“With who?” I prodded as I stared at Zak. He’d gone pale at Liam’s words.

“It’s not important,” was all Liam said. He tried to push past me again, but this time with a lot less fight.

“You want Zak and I to fight for each other, but you won’t do the same for yourself? You can’t even say his name?”

“He’s my little brother,” Liam whispered. “I promised—”

“What? That you’d protect him? Watch out for him? Always be there for him? So what’s the plan, Liam? Do all that from afar? Watch him build a life that’s supposed to be with you? You think what Zak and I have just *happened*?” I looked at Zak as I said the next words. “Do you think we weren’t each scared as fuck that we’d screw it up... that we’d end up getting hurt, or worse, hurting the other?”

I cradled Liam’s face with my hands as I drew him closer to me. As I leaned in to let my mouth hover along his cheek, I whispered, “If you love him only as a brother, then yeah, you need to let him go because anything else would be cruel. Not with the way he feels about you.”

“He doesn’t—”

“Look at him, Liam. *Really* look at him. Then tell me he doesn’t feel that way about you.”

Liam gasped at my words and tensed in my hold. I placed a gentle kiss on his cheek before I released him so he could turn and see what I was

seeing... Noah, standing at the base of the stairs, his tear-filled eyes saying all the things his mouth couldn't.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ZAK

I didn't know who my heart was breaking for more at the moment. From the tear stains on Noah's face, I had no doubt he'd heard pretty much our entire conversation with Liam. That wasn't really a surprise, given the fact that Killian and I had suspected he wouldn't actually go to sleep when we'd taken him up to our room to lie down. Killian and I hadn't spoken after that as we'd waited for Liam to look for Noah. We'd known it would only be a matter of time before the young man would go in search of his brother. When Killian had started to finally talk as we'd sat in the living room waiting, I'd wanted to rage at him because I'd heard the finality in his tone, the "I don't want to hurt you anymore, Zak" tone. I'd been preparing for it but hearing it had set me off in a way I couldn't have predicted.

Maybe it was because I'd spent several days watching Liam and Noah tiptoe around each other, struggling to accept how they felt about one another. Killian and I had done the same in the beginning of our relationship, and it had taken one particularly tense argument where I'd tried to push him away before we'd finally started saying what we actually felt.

I hadn't been about to let that happen again, especially after seeing Killian in the kitchen with Liam. Whatever he and Liam had been talking about had clearly been a painful topic and while I knew Killian had more than his fair share of those, there'd been no doubt in my mind that the topic at hand had been me.

To know Killian was hurting so badly had just about killed me, but it had also told me what I needed to know.

He was still in this.

He still wanted to be with me.

It was the shitty voice in my head that had told me over and over as a kid that no one wanted me long enough to stay that had been trying to convince me that Killian was done with me. That voice had reared its ugly head early on in our relationship, but fortunately Killian had fought that particular demon for the both of us. This time, Killian was the one battling demons and he needed me. That voice in my head was just going to have to take a back seat. If Killian didn't want me, then he'd have to tell me so, once there weren't any voices in *his* mind torturing him into believing I was better off without him.

As much as I would have liked to dwell on the renewed hope I was feeling, *it* also had to take a back seat because learning about everything Liam and Noah had been through was tearing me apart inside all over again. Even now, watching Liam as he took in the sight of the young man he thought he was only allowed to care about as a sibling was painful to watch. He looked like a deer caught in headlights. He actually took a step back and bumped into Killian. Killian put his hands on Liam's arms long enough to steady him. My lover's eyes connected with mine. I loved him so much in that moment that I hurt with it.

But I couldn't deny that part of my heart had become entangled in the relationship that was being confronted right in front of me.

"Noah, I," Liam began, but then he stopped talking. He dropped his eyes as silent tears streamed down his face. As badly as I wanted to take him in my arms, I knew he didn't need me or Killian at the moment. I felt Killian's fingers brush mine. I took his proffered hand and carefully moved past Liam.

Noah was the one who came to Liam. He stopped just a few inches before him. Liam wouldn't or *couldn't* look up.

"Noah, I'm so sorry. For everything. I should have taken better care of you. I shouldn't have left you at home... I should have—"

"Li... Li..."

I froze at the sound of the foreign voice that came out as more of a rusty rasp than anything else. Killian tensed behind me and his fingers squeezed my hand harder than he probably intended.

Liam sucked in a breath but didn't look up.

"Liam," Noah finally managed to get out after a few more tries. He looked like he was going to be sick. Beads of sweat dotted his brow and his

skin had gone really pale. His hands were fisted so tight that the knuckles were bloodless. If I hadn't known him better, I would have thought he was angry.

At the sound of his name, Liam let out a choked sound, then looked up at Noah. I had enough of a profile view of Liam to see that he looked both shocked and terrified. But when a shaky Noah smiled at him – his sweet, endearing, warm-up-your-soul smile – then whispered his name again, Liam completely lost it. He covered his eyes with his hand for a moment as he tried to hold back his emotion, but finally gave up.

“God, Noah, I love you so much,” he somehow managed to get out, then he was covering Noah's mouth with his. Explosions of happiness detonated in my belly as I watched Liam consume Noah's mouth as he held his face. Noah grabbed his wrists like he usually did when Liam was talking him through a panic attack, but there was absolutely no panic happening. Noah was desperately kissing Liam back, though his inexperience was evident.

“Sorry,” Liam said as he pulled back a little. His eyes were closed, as were Noah's. They had their foreheads pressed together as each tried to catch their breath. Killian's lips grazed my temple as he leaned his front against my back. I covered his hand where it was resting on my belly.

Liam kissed Noah softly again. “Say it again, Noah. Please. Just one more time, okay?”

“Liam,” Noah whispered. His voice still had a rough texture to it, but I wasn't sure I'd ever heard a more beautiful sound in my life.

Liam must have agreed with me because he growled, “So beautiful, Noah. *My* Noah,” then he kissed him again.

The kiss went from reverent and exploratory to hot and needy quickly as Noah found his own rhythm and began kissing Liam back with more finesse. My own body reacted to the sight of the gorgeous men kissing. I tried to quell the reaction, but when Killian's lips grazed over my pulse point, I couldn't help but moan. I twined my fingers with his as he pressed hot, openmouthed kisses up and down my neck. As he kissed me, my eyes were glued to Noah and Liam.

Which immediately had me feeling guilty.

This moment was between Noah and Liam. They weren't just some random couple in a club or something. And the feelings I was having

weren't just about me getting off on watching them take pleasure in each other.

Wasn't that the real problem with all this?

As Liam and Noah continued to feast on each other's mouths, Liam turned their bodies so Noah's back was to me. They weren't more than a foot from me and Killian, and it was all I could do not to reach out and touch one of them.

Both of them.

My free hand sought out Killian's thigh behind me. I felt a little less guilty when I felt his erection pressed against my ass.

I used my other hand to reach up and wrap around his neck so I could pull his mouth down to mine. I moaned when his lips covered mine and his tongue dipped inside.

How long had it been since he'd kissed me like this?

I felt tears stinging the backs of my eyes. I wanted to tell him how much I'd missed him, but I was too afraid to risk losing his kiss again.

"It's okay, baby, I'm not going anywhere," Killian whispered against my lips when he broke the kiss himself.

"Killian," I breathed, then I dragged him down for another kiss. The way he owned my mouth was all-powerful and so very welcome. I'd fucked plenty of guys when I'd been younger and, on some occasions, I topped Killian. But I never felt more like myself when Killian was the one in control. He made me feel safe and wanted and cherished.

Even when he was at his most dominant, Killian always made *me* feel like the most powerful human being on the planet.

When we were forced to come up for air, I saw that Noah and Liam were in a similar position as us, with Liam at Noah's back.

And they were watching us.

It was intoxicating.

Frightening.

Right.

But I knew it couldn't be... it just didn't make sense. This was Liam and Noah's moment and they needed privacy to enjoy it.

Noah leaned back against Liam's chest. His stunning green eyes were alight with so much joy and love that I couldn't help but smile myself. We had just a few seconds to watch each other before Liam impatiently claimed Noah's mouth again. Noah turned in his arms. I allowed myself another

moment to take in the sight of them, then dropped my hand to close it around Killian's.

"Let's go upstairs," I said as I lifted his hand and pressed a kiss into the palm before I interlinked our fingers. My eyes met Killian's. His mouth sought out mine again for a brief kiss, then he held my hand so he could lead me from the room.

But I didn't get far before another set of fingers closed around my free hand.

Small, slim fingers.

I looked back over my shoulder to see Noah holding on to my hand. Liam was nuzzling his neck, but Noah was watching me.

And Killian.

His eyes shifted back and forth between us a few times.

I thought maybe he was trying to thank us for our role in bringing him and Liam together, but he didn't release me after I gave him a reassuring nod. Instead, he gave my hand a tug.

I finally gave in and took a step toward him, but he still didn't release me. Between tugs on my hand, he was frantically kissing Liam back. I looked over my shoulder at Killian to see if he understood what was happening, but his eyes were fixated on Liam and Noah. Both young men would break their kisses long enough to glance at the two of us with a strange look of desperation and desire before they'd fuse their mouths together.

"Killian," I began, but then Killian was kissing me hard and deep. I practically whimpered when he tore his mouth from mine. Noah was still holding my hand. His thumb ran along mine to match the rhythm of his and Liam's kiss.

I knew it was wrong, but I imagined it was Liam's mouth on mine. I wondered what sounds Noah would make if Killian kissed him the same way.

What the hell was wrong with me?

"Killian," I whimpered as my body felt like it was going to implode. It was too many emotions bombarding me all at once. Right behind them was the terrible fear that when it was all over, I'd be alone again. I'd get a taste of perfection, and then lose it just like all those times as a kid when a family had decided I wasn't worth keeping.

“Just feel, baby,” Killian urged as he kissed me gently. “It’s okay. I promise...”

I looked at Noah and Liam because surely this couldn’t be okay with them. But Noah was still holding my hand and Liam was watching us both and Killian was touching me, and I just wanted it all so fucking badly.

My eyes met Noah’s again as fear tried one last time to take root in my brain. But with a single, simple, whispered word, Noah bound the four of us together in a way that no longer seemed even a little bit wrong.

“Stay.”

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PART VI

Killian, Zak, Liam & Noah

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

NOAH

My throat felt raw, but I somehow managed to get the word out as my eyes held Zak's. If Liam hadn't been running his hand up and down my spine as his mouth pressed kisses to my neck, I doubted I would have been able to even get my lips and tongue to work together to form the word. It seemed like it had taken a small miracle just to say Liam's name, and even that had been a battle of wills. My mind had been screaming at me the whole time not to make a sound, but my heart had wanted Liam too badly to listen. I'd wanted to give him something, anything, that would prove how much I needed him.

I was pretty sure I'd heard most of what he'd said to Killian and Zak from my position on the stairs. My heart had split in two when Liam had commented that I was better off with Zak and Killian, and it had taken every ounce of self-control I'd had to stay put and trust in the other two men to fix things. No, I hadn't foreseen this exact moment because that had been just too much to dream for, but I had believed the two older men would try their best to stop Liam from walking away. I'd heard all their pleas and arguments when they'd asked me to explain what I'd meant by me being the one who'd hurt Liam, but I hadn't had the strength to say anything else. I'd just been too ashamed.

Liam might not believe any of it was my fault, but I knew better. I hadn't been invisible enough around his father... if I'd done a better job of staying in my world of silence instead of dreaming too big, that afternoon never would have happened. As it was, I hadn't noticed Spencer's car in the garage when I'd come home from school. I'd been humming one of Liam's favorite songs and had gone straight to his room to read through my dad's

journal. My behavior had alerted Spencer to my presence. When I'd looked up after sensing I was no longer alone, the man had been standing in the doorway of Liam's room, his face drawn tight with anger and a glass of brown liquid in his hand. I'd been able to smell the alcohol from where I'd been sitting at Liam's desk. Spencer had asked me what the fuck I was doing in his son's room, then he'd started in on accusing me of knowing about my aunt's infidelity. His rage had grown and grown, and my silence seemed to have only fueled it.

I'd been expecting him to hit me when he'd grabbed me and started calling my aunt names. When he'd grabbed my crotch instead, I'd tried to twist away.

Which had set him off all over again.

And then things had happened so fast I hadn't been able to react. I'd been catapulted to a place in my mind where making any sound at all spelled certain death, so I'd just lain there and cried. I hadn't even fought back when Spencer had released me long enough to yank my pants and underwear down. When I'd heard that zipper being drawn down, it was like something inside of me had died and I'd welcomed the darkness that had come to claim me.

Then Liam had been there and his rage as he'd slammed his fists into his father's face over and over had been what had snapped me out of my daze.

As much as Liam wanted to believe it wasn't my fault, the reality was that I'd gotten too comfortable, too complacent. And I hadn't fought back, hadn't told his father to stop. Spencer had been drunk enough that I probably could have gotten away, but I'd chosen the route of silence to save my life.

I couldn't even say that anything had really changed in the six months that Liam and I had been homeless. I'd always looked to Liam to protect me.

But I'd never done the same for him.

I hadn't even realized he'd started selling his body to keep us both alive, though there'd been definite signs. Like the few occasions where he'd returned to the library or coffee shop he'd left me at while he went to "look for work" and told me he'd gotten us a motel room for the night. He'd told me he'd convinced the motel owner to let him clean the rooms in exchange for us staying a night, but no matter how early I'd get up the following

morning to help him clean, Liam would already be awake and supposedly finished with them. It was on those occasions that he'd shower repeatedly throughout the night and more than once, I'd heard him crying in it. I'd finally learned the truth about four months after we'd left home. I'd decided to follow Liam after he'd left me at the library.

I'd never be able to unsee what I'd stumbled upon.

Liam on his knees in an alley, surrounded by garbage, with a balding, grunting, grotesquely heavy man's penis down his throat. I'd run all the way back to the library and when Liam had shown up with money he'd supposedly gotten for helping the owner of a bar unload a delivery truck, I'd barely managed not to cry. Liam had bought us each a bowl of hot soup at a greasy diner. I'd eaten it, but when I'd excused myself to go to the bathroom, I'd thrown it all up and then some. When I'd eventually had the guts to confront him about it, Liam had denied the whole thing.

So no matter what Liam said or what Zak and Killian wanted to believe, everything that had led up to this moment was my fault. And while I was grateful we'd found Zak and Killian, never in a million years would I be glad that it had come at Liam's expense.

But as thankful as I was to the two other men, I'd grabbed Zak's hand as he and Killian had started to walk away for one reason and one reason only.

I wanted them there.

I didn't know why; I just did. It still would have been right if it'd just been me and Liam, but with Zak and Killian there it was just... *more*.

The fact that Killian seemed to be encouraging Zak, and Liam hadn't hesitated even a little when I'd asked the two men to stay, told me I wasn't the only one feeling it.

Whatever *it* was.

I continued to rub Zak's thumb with mine even as Liam sought out my mouth again. I'd imagined what his kiss would feel like a million times, but none of my fantasies had come close to this. And I still couldn't process the fact that he'd actually said those three little words to me.

I love you.

Maybe I'd imagined that part, but with the way he was kissing me, I didn't think so. His tongue moved over mine, sometimes gently, sometimes more demanding. He led, and I happily followed. I'd never been kissed before, so I had no clue what I was doing, but Liam didn't seem to care in the least. In fact, every time I took a chance and slipped my tongue into his

mouth, he growled low in his throat and then kissed me even harder. At some point, I was forced to release Zak's hand as Liam crushed me to him, but I could hear moans coming from behind me, so I knew we weren't alone.

"Noah," Liam whispered against my mouth. "You're so fucking beautiful, Noah."

I wanted to be able to say words like that to him, but it had been so damn hard just to string together the sounds that created his name. Not to mention my voice had sounded like some weird, animated version of a frog's. So I did my best to tell him in other ways how much I loved him and needed him.

"Look at them, sweetheart," Liam said as he nuzzled my neck and then urged me to turn around. Killian and Zak were locked in an embrace so heated that my already stiff cock became painfully harder. They kissed with their whole bodies. Hands were roaming and grabbing and touching with both familiarity and desperation. Killian had the fingers of his left hand down the back of the waistband of Zak's jeans, and whatever he was doing was making Zak whimper desperately.

Liam's hands grazed my chest as we watched the pair, then Liam was on me again. Heat flooded my body as I began trying to find relief for my dick. I'd masturbated plenty of times after meeting Liam, but I'd never felt this level of sensation before, not even at the moment I'd find my release.

I let out a little gasp when Liam gripped my ass in his hands and pulled me up so I was practically humping his thigh. His hot hands slid up beneath the back of my shirt before covering my ass again and urging me to ride his thigh. His tongue never stopped teasing mine.

Liam lifted me a little more. I tried to stop him so he wouldn't hurt his ribs, but he wouldn't be denied. Seconds later, he was laying me on the couch and his weight came down on top of me. I opened my legs to make room for him to lie between them and moaned when his hard cock came into contact with mine through our pants.

"Is this okay?" Liam asked as he pulled his mouth from mine and stroked my hair. "I don't want to scare you."

I put my hand against his cheek and shook my head. Despite what his father had done to me, I'd never associated that fear with Liam. Yes, I was nervous about the actual sex act, but I knew Liam would cut off his arm before he ever hurt me. I wasn't foolish enough to think there'd be no pain

whatsoever, but I trusted Liam with everything I was. I pulled his head down for another kiss. His mouth was hot on mine, then he was blazing a path of kisses down my neck as his hand gripped my hip. I turned my head to give him better access and opened my eyes just in time to see Killian pull Zak down on the oversized chair Killian was sitting on. He kept Zak's back to his front. His big hand was wrapped around Zak's throat as he held the man's head back. Zak's skin was flushed with color as he submitted to his lover, and I felt my own dick jump at the sight of the two. Killian's eyes met mine and I swore it was like I could feel his touch right next to Liam's on my body. I whimpered in response.

Liam's mouth was on my jawline. He kept his kisses soft as he alternated between watching the other couple and moving his mouth closer to my ear. "Can you feel his hands on you, baby?" Liam asked. At that exact moment, his hand mirrored Killian's as Killian ran his fingers down Zak's body until his hand was covering Zak's cock. I could see the outline of it pressing against his jeans.

I cried out and bucked my hips up into Liam's hand when he cupped me. I tore my eyes from the two lovers and reached for Liam. I yanked him down for a kiss as I began pressing against his hand in an effort to find relief. He obliged me for a moment, but when I was sure I was going to come, he drew his hand away. I shook my head violently and actually whispered a harsh, "No."

"Hang on, my love," Liam said. "I'll make it better, okay?"

It felt like I couldn't breathe, but it wasn't the same kind of scary feeling like when I was having one of my attacks. It was more like I was too hot and something inside me was wound too tight. Liam kissed me again but kept the kisses soft and short. "Your voice is so beautiful, Noah." As he spoke, Liam's free hand found mine and he twined our fingers together. "Thank you," he breathed, then he kissed me more deeply. I could hear Zak moaning as Killian said something quietly to him, and that just made that coil inside of me wind even tighter.

I needed relief and I needed it now, but even if it were easier to make the words come out, I wouldn't know how to tell Liam anyway. Because I knew deep in my bones that what was happening to me was about so much more than just physical pleasure.

My only hope was that, like it had been since he'd first comforted me in his father's kitchen, Liam would know what I needed and would do

everything in his power to give it to me.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

LIAM

Noah's silent plea had me leaning down and pressing my lips against his temple. "Shhh, baby, almost there," I said. He was shaking violently beneath me, proof of how far gone he was. I wasn't much further behind him. I was just hoping like hell that I wouldn't wake up anytime soon from the dream I was having.

Because there was just no way any of this could be real.

Life couldn't be that kind to me. It couldn't have Noah lying trustingly beneath me as his eyes shone with emotion or Killian and Zak just feet away taking their pleasure in each other... and us.

Like me and Noah, the men kept alternating between each other and watching us. Killian had gotten Zak's shirt off and his dick free from his jeans, while Zak had his hand down Killian's pants. Zak was writhing against Killian's body as he fucked the man's tight grip. My mouth was literally watering because I wanted Zak's cock in my mouth.

And Killian's dick in my ass.

While I was making love to Noah.

It was something I'd only ever seen in the kinkiest of porn scenes, but somehow when I envisioned it in my mind, there was nothing salacious about it. Maybe because the parts I was most focused on were the words Killian would say to me as he encouraged me to take his thick cock inside of me, the reverent touches Zak would give me as he held my face while he pushed himself deep into my mouth, and Noah's whimpers of pleasure as his body welcomed mine.

While I'd hated every second of letting strangers fuck me for cash or rides or a roof over Noah's and my heads for a night, I'd been with a couple

of guys in college, both on the giving and receiving end, and I'd loved every second of it. Yeah, I'd been imagining it was Noah I was with and I'd often picked men who looked like him, but they'd still been positive experiences. So I knew what good sex could be.

I had no clue what making love felt like, though.

And despite the fact that Noah and I were being watched and were doing a fair amount of watching ourselves, I couldn't put another term on what was happening between us besides making love. I didn't even have plans to actually fuck Noah tonight, but I still felt like I was making love to him and, in a weird way, being made love to by Killian and Zak.

Yeah, it was pure craziness.

But I didn't care.

The train from Crazy Town had left the station a long time ago.

I finally had what I wanted and fuck if I was going to question that now.

As Killian pumped Zak's dick and Zak palmed Killian beneath the fabric of his jeans, I slipped a hand between Noah's and my bodies and got both our zippers down. I shifted my gaze to Noah so I could watch him for any signs of fear, but there were none.

Only raw, powerful need.

"Almost there, baby," I said as I brushed my mouth over Noah's. He tried to kiss me back, but he was panting too hard. He cried out when I closed my hand around his wet dick. I used all the natural lubrication his body had pumped out to gently start jacking him off. Noah's hands closed around my upper arms as he closed his eyes and arched his back.

"Fuck, Zak, yes," I heard Killian say. I shot the pair a glance and saw that Zak had shifted his position so that it was his ass rubbing against Killian's crotch.

Zak's bare ass.

His dick looked purple as Killian teased and tortured it. It was glistening with pre-cum.

Like Noah's.

And mine.

No doubt Killian's too.

Killian's fingers threaded through Zak's hair so he could drag him down for a kiss. My own dick throbbed at the sight, and I quickly fumbled between Noah's and my body to release my own dick. I covered Noah's mouth with mine when I took us both in hand. I swallowed his moans as I

began furiously pumping my hand up and down our hard cocks. The sensation of Noah's hot, silken flesh sliding against mine had me grunting and groaning as we both instinctively fucked my hand. Moans, whimpers, and the sound of slapping flesh permeated the silence of the room. Sweat was pouring down my brow as Noah and I both raced to the finish line at the same frenetic pace.

"Oh God, Killian, please!" Zak cried.

"Fuck me harder, baby. Pretend my cock's in that tight ass of yours," Killian growled.

Noah whimpered, and I could practically see him responding to every dirty word Killian whispered to his lover. Noah's teeth bit down hard on his lower lip as he fought the pleasure that had to be building inside of him.

"Don't fight it, Noah. Just let go. I'm right there with you."

Noah's eyes flipped open. He hesitated, then nodded. His hand crept up to the back of my neck and then he pulled me down for a kiss. A deep, dirty one that he was in complete control of. I began thrusting into my hand as I imagined being buried deep inside his perfect body. "So close," I gritted out between his passionate kisses. Noah's free hand slipped to my ass, then went beneath the loosened waistband. The second he touched my crack, I lost control and I bit down on the spot where his neck met his shoulder as I started to come. I desperately pumped his dick over and over, twisting my hand at the top. I found his sensitive spot just below the head and it took just a tiny bit more pressure on it to send him over. His arms wrapped around my neck as he cried out. My own orgasm slammed into me and I could feel liquid heat, his *and* mine, coating my hand.

"Fuck, yes, Noah!" I yelled as the pleasure seemed to go on forever. I was dimly aware of Killian and Zak letting go with similar, passion-filled cries, but I was too lost in my own haze of pleasure to do anything but bask in the sensation of jet after jet of cum spewing out of me. When it felt like my very life had been drained out of my balls, I collapsed on top of Noah. He was panting as hard as me, if not harder. Violent aftershocks kept hitting his body for what seemed like hours. I pressed kisses to his cheek, then his mouth, but he didn't kiss me back for several minutes, proof his body was in recovery mode. When he did kiss me back, he went all in. Minutes later, his eyes started drifting shut and I carefully eased some of my weight off him and wiped my hand on my shirt. It wasn't until he was fast asleep, and I

got up to get a washcloth so I could clean him off, that I noticed the living room was empty aside from us.

And I couldn't help but be just a little bit sorry about that.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

KILLIAN

I was still awake, so I heard the crash right before Liam's voice rang through the house.
"Killian! Zak!"

I'd already jostled Zak awake by abruptly climbing out of the bed when I heard the commotion downstairs, but the second he heard Liam calling for us, he was out of bed too. We'd both worn boxer shorts to bed, so neither of us bothered with any other clothes as we tore out of the room.

After the heart-stopping orgasms Zak and I had both had, we'd watched Noah and Liam snuggle together in their post-orgasmic bliss for a minute before we'd gone up to our room. We hadn't spoken as we'd showered together. We'd barely even washed ourselves. Instead, we'd just held on to one another beneath the spray of hot water for a while, then we'd gotten into bed and I'd held Zak in my arms until he'd fallen asleep. I'd promised him I'd be there when he woke up in the morning and we'd talk then.

Really talk.

And I meant it, too.

I just wasn't sure where we'd start.

Certainly what had happened tonight in the living room would need to be at the top of the list because it was safe to say that never in a million years could either of us have seen that coming. I, myself, was still trying to make sense of my emotions before, during, and after the whole thing. Zak and I had often seen guys making out in clubs early on in our dating years and while it may have turned us on, we'd never invited anyone to participate in our escapades afterwards, though that was a very common practice in that scene. Sometimes we'd talked about how hot we thought a

particular couple was, but those men never even figured into our fantasies. We might have gotten turned on by the whole thing, but by the time we were going at it in our car or at home or, on the rare occasion, still at the club, it was just me and Zak.

Physically.

And mentally.

We'd never needed or wanted more than that.

But tonight hadn't been the same thing and I wanted to understand why.

Liam and Noah had been gorgeous together, and Zak and I had come so hard and so fast that it just added a layer of confusion to the whole thing.

The thing was, we hadn't just gotten off as we'd watched the other men. I knew enough about Zak and his reactions to know that there'd been something more there. And I'd certainly felt that myself, too.

But I didn't exactly know what the *that* was. I was trying to attribute it to having been so long since Zak and I had really made love, but my gut was telling me that wasn't the only factor.

As it was, I forced all of that to the back of my mind as I flew down the stairs. I assumed Noah was having another nightmare, but when I got to the living room with Zak right behind me, all I saw was Liam.

On the floor.

He was holding his head and trying to climb to his feet. There was a trickle of blood coming from his temple.

"What happened?" I said as Zak and I reached him. Liam tried to push us away.

"You have to go after him!"

"Noah?" I asked as I looked around the room.

"I think he ran out the back door! Go, you have to find him!"

"Go," Zak said. "I'll stay with him." Zak was already in the process of lifting Liam's hand so he could examine the cut that was there. "Stay put," he said when Liam tried to get up again. I could see a little bit of blood on the carpet by the leg of the coffee table.

"I tried to wake him. It was an accident. I lost my balance and fell... I think he was still sleeping or something when he took off," Liam said, clearly in pain.

"I'll find him," I said as I climbed to my feet and rushed to the back of the house. The back door in the kitchen was wide open so I didn't even bother checking the guest room first. Waldo, Blueberry, and Skittles were

still on their perches but squawking nervously. I could see Waldo trying to jump off his, presumably to follow after Noah. I shut the door behind me as I ran outside because I didn't want to risk the birds getting out. I scanned the darkness and immediately thought about how scared Noah must be.

"Noah!" I called, though I didn't really expect him to answer me. I headed for the barn, thinking he'd found a spot to hide with Nana, but then I heard a high-pitched barking sound.

I knew that bark.

It was Bentley.

And it was the sound he often made when he found some injured critter in the woods.

"Please," I whispered to myself as I followed the sound. We lived in a heavily wooded area that Noah could easily get hurt or lost in. And if he was asleep like Liam suspected, he might not respond to my calls in any kind of way.

Thank fuck Bentley had stayed downstairs and followed Noah out of the house. Most of the other dogs usually slept in the bedroom with me and Zak.

Pain cut into my feet as I ran barefoot through the woods. It was early November, so the weather had already started to get close to the freezing mark overnight. There was a heavy layer of mist, so within a minute, my skin felt chilled. Branches tore at my skin as I weaved in and out of the trees. The moon was bright enough to help guide me, but I knew without Bentley, the chances I'd find Noah in the darkness were slim to none.

It took me a few minutes to zero in on Bentley's bark and thankfully, it didn't appear to be changing position. I found the dog near a slow-running stream that I knew was a good quarter mile from our property. I didn't see Noah at first, so I had a moment of panic that Bentley hadn't found the young man after all. But then Bentley shifted, and I saw a flash of white among some heavy brush a few dozen feet from the stream.

I moved slowly because I didn't want to scare Noah. "Noah, it's me, Killian," I said as I approached him. I could see that he was lying in the fetal position. He had one hand pressed over his ear and was using the other to cover his mouth. His eyes were squeezed shut.

He made no sound whatsoever.

"Noah," I breathed as I bent down next to him. He'd tried to dig himself into the thick brush, but the leafless branches did nothing to hide him from

view. He was covered in small cuts because, like me, he'd left the house in just his underwear.

Bentley kept trying to lick Noah's face to get a response out of him, but Noah didn't react except to roll himself into a tighter ball.

I realized Liam had been right... Noah was likely still asleep.

I wasn't sure what to do since all the other times he'd had nightmares, he'd woken up on his own. But the one thing that *was* clear was that I needed to get him out of there. He was shaking violently from the cold.

"Noah, baby, we need to go back to the house, okay?" I said as I reached out to touch his arm. He didn't pull away, but like with Bentley, he tried to curl himself into a tighter ball. I used my hands to try and break off some of the branches surrounding him, then slid my palms beneath him as best I could. He let out a little whimper when I lifted him.

"I've got you, sweetheart," I murmured as I pulled him against my chest and carefully stood. He wasn't very heavy and once I had us upright, it was easier to carry his weight as I got him settled in my arms. His skin felt ice cold against mine. He had one arm curled against his chest. His free hand was pressed over his ear again and he was using my body to shield his other ear. The only sounds around us were the creak of the wind through the trees, the rustling of the leaves around us, and the trickle of the stream, so I had no idea what sound it was that he was trying to drown out.

I knew if I followed the stream, it would lead to a narrow trail that would take us back to the house. I walked as quickly as I could because I knew Zak and Liam would be going crazy with worry and, more importantly, I needed to get Noah warm. Bentley trotted ahead of me but never went farther than a few feet.

It was a good minute after I'd picked Noah up that I felt the way he was holding himself change. Noah began to whimper as he shifted in my arms.

I knew he was finally awake.

"It's all right, Noah, I've got you. You're safe."

I had no clue if Noah remembered what had happened or not, but suddenly he began to cry – big, heartbreaking sobs. He curled into my chest and wrapped his arms around my neck. I lifted him a little higher so I could kiss his temple. I could feel tears stinging the backs of my eyes.

"It's okay, baby. Gonna get you home and we're going to take care of you... me, Liam, and Zak. We'll figure all this out."

I could feel his hot tears spilling down my throat but thankfully, he nodded against my neck.

I quickened my pace and kept murmuring encouraging words to Noah that we were almost home.

I could hear Zak and Liam calling out for both of us as I neared the house. "Here!" I called. "I have him! He's safe!"

Zak and Liam reached us as soon as we cleared the woods.

"Noah, baby?" Liam whispered as he reached out to put his hand on Noah's forehead. Liam looked unsteady on his feet. I could still see blood on his temple. There was a towel in his hand that had blood on it.

I kept us moving toward the house. Zak reached around me to put his hand against Noah's skin. "We need to get him warm."

I nodded. Zak took Liam by the arm and practically dragged him to the back door. When I entered the house with Noah still in my arms, Zak was holding the door open and trying to get Liam to put the towel back on the cut on his head.

"Our room," I said as I hurried past both of them. I got Noah into our bedroom and then headed straight for the attached bathroom. I set him on the vanity. He wrapped his arms around himself. When he saw Liam enter the room, the sobs he'd managed to control started all over again. Liam took him in his arms but kept him sitting on the vanity.

"It's okay, sweetheart," Liam said gently as he held him. Zak quickly began examining all the cuts on Noah's body as I got the water in the shower going.

"They're all superficial," Zak said to me. "I'll treat them afterwards."

I nodded and put my hand on Liam's back. "Let me take him, Liam. I'll start getting him warm while Zak fixes you up."

"No, I... he needs me."

"We'll be right here," I said to Liam as I cupped his face so he'd look at me. He looked terrified.

My heart squeezed painfully when I saw the silent plea in his eyes.

"We'll take care of him," I said. "All of us, okay?"

Liam hesitated, then nodded. To Noah he said, "Go with Killian, okay, baby? I'll join you in just a second."

I put my arms around Noah and lifted him again so he wouldn't have to walk on his scratched-up feet. Zak opened the shower door for me. Noah whimpered when the warm water hit him. My own skin stung as the water

came into contact with my chilled flesh, so I could only imagine how uncomfortable it was for Noah. "It'll get better in a minute, sweetheart."

We were both still wearing our underwear, but I didn't really care about the dirty material getting wet. All that mattered was warming Noah up. I sat down on the built-in bench in the shower, which put Noah in the direct path of the shower spray. He was tense in my arms for several minutes until his skin began to lose some of its chill and the water became comforting rather than painful. I could see Liam and Zak sending us worried glances as Zak worked to close the cut on Liam's temple with butterfly bandages. When he was done, Liam hurried to join us in the shower. Fortunately, it was big enough for all three of us. I stood up with Noah in my arms and urged Liam to sit, then placed Noah in his arms, since I didn't want Noah's feet to come into contact with the floor. I used the handheld sprayer to carefully wash Noah's feet as Liam cuddled him. I couldn't hear what Liam was saying to him, but his words calmed Noah further and within minutes, the young man was asleep again.

To Liam I said, "I need to take his underwear off, okay? You can wash him and make sure there aren't any serious cuts anywhere that we haven't already checked."

"Okay," Liam said. He and I worked together to carefully maneuver Noah until I got the underwear off. I handed Liam the handheld sprayer and then quickly stripped my own boxers off. Zak was ready with a towel for me when I got out of the shower, along with a pair of sweats.

Once I had them on, I opened the shower again and said, "I'll take him while you get cleaned up."

Liam carefully stood and handed Noah off to me. I sat Noah on the vanity again. He'd woken up a bit, but was still drowsy so as Zak examined him, I let Noah rest his forehead on my shoulder and I kept my arm around him. By the time Zak was finished drying him and treating the cuts, Liam was out of the shower. I picked Noah up and carried him to our bed. Zak pulled the covers to the side so I could lay Noah down. I wasn't surprised to see Zak holding Liam's hand on the opposite side of the bed. As strong as Liam was, he was clearly rattled by what had happened. Zak urged Liam to get in the bed from his side as I laid Noah down. Liam automatically moved to the middle where I'd put Noah and pulled him into his arms.

My intent had been to leave the couple in the bed while Zak and I kept an eye on them from the small sitting area by the picture window, but Noah

grabbed my hand when I made a move to release him.

“Zak and I will be right here in the room the whole time, Noah,” I said. “You and Liam are safe.”

Noah turned his head to look at me. His eyes were swollen from crying and his face was covered in little nicks and cuts. I could see a bruise forming on his jaw. He shook his head briefly, then tugged my fingers until he had them pressed against his chest. I looked up at Zak. He nodded quickly and then climbed into the bed on Liam’s side. Our bed was a king-sized one, but it was still a tight fit when I lay down behind Noah. He was still holding my hand against his chest, so I fitted my body against his back. Liam was holding Noah in his arms, so my hand was actually pressed between both of them. Zak curled up against Liam’s back and I saw Liam close his eyes. He reached up to touch Zak’s fingers where they were resting on Liam’s shoulder.

Zak put his mouth down by Liam’s ear. “It’s okay, Liam. Just sleep. We’ve got you both, okay?”

“Okay,” Liam choked out. The young man’s exhaustion and fear broke my heart. I hadn’t witnessed Noah’s reaction when he’d had his nightmare, but my heart was still pounding from the sight of him curled up among those bushes as he tried to make himself as small as possible. As Liam’s eyes drifted shut, I looked up at Zak. He briefly lifted his hand from Liam’s shoulder so he could cup my cheek. He didn’t say anything.

He didn’t need to because I was certain he and I were on the same page.

None of what was happening made sense, but for the moment, we were all exactly where we needed to be.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ZAK

It was a small sniffing sound that woke me up, which, after the night's events, surprised me because I'd been sure I wouldn't have even been able to fall asleep. The nurse in me had been too concerned about both Liam and Noah to relax. I'd checked their pulses throughout the night and even though Liam had sworn to me that he hadn't lost consciousness when his head had hit the coffee table, I'd still woken him up a few times throughout the night to make sure he wasn't showing signs of a concussion. Fortunately, Noah hadn't had another nightmare and he'd slept through the entire night as far as I could tell, but I suspected Killian hadn't gotten much sleep either. I'd looked over at him a few times and had seen him watching me or watching our unexpected bed partners. We'd left one of the bedside lights on its lowest setting for Noah, so I'd been able to see Killian's expression.

He'd been in thinking mode.

Cop mode.

I didn't blame him. I was just as desperate to understand what was driving Noah's behavior. As we'd searched for Noah and Killian the night before, Liam had told me that Noah hadn't ever done any kind of sleepwalking before. In fact, he'd never had as many nightmares in such a short amount of time before, either. Noah hadn't spoken again since the previous night when he'd said Liam's name and then asked me and Killian to stay. That definitely had me wondering what was driving his mutism. While I hadn't expected him to just start talking up a storm, I'd been surprised that he hadn't at least said Liam's name again.

But I instinctively knew the sniffing sound was him.

I was still in the position I'd been in most of the night... pressed up against Liam's back. I opened my eyes to see that Noah was awake. He was facing Liam with Killian at his back. Killian's eyes were closed, as were Liam's.

Noah was staring at the cut on Liam's temple. He reached up his fingers like he was going to touch the bandaged injury, but then pulled them back. I noticed that Killian's big hand was spread across Noah's chest and Liam's hand was resting on his hip. He was pretty much sandwiched between the two larger men, and I couldn't help but think how right he looked there.

Noah's eyes met mine.

"He's not hurt badly, Noah."

Noah pointed at himself, then Liam's head.

My stomach sank as I realized what he was inadvertently revealing by asking the question.

He didn't remember the events of the night before... at least not the part where his nightmare had caused Liam to fall and hit his head.

"No, baby, you didn't," Liam murmured. "It was my fault. I slipped and fell while I was trying to wake you up."

Noah dropped his eyes to Liam. They began to fill with tears. He clearly didn't believe his lover.

"Noah," Liam whispered sadly, then he leaned in so he could kiss Noah softly on the lips. "All that matters is you're okay. Do you hear me?"

I could see Noah was on the verge of losing it, so Liam kissed him again.

And again.

He kissed him harder and deeper until Noah could do nothing but return his kisses.

Fervently.

I could feel my body responding to the sight and I knew I should get out of the bed, but my body refused to listen to the commands my brain was sending it. I looked up to see that Killian had woken up and was supporting his head with his free hand so he could watch the two younger men. His hand was still on Noah's chest. His eyes were filled with hunger as he watched Liam and Noah kiss. Then he was looking at me. We somehow managed to lean across both men so our mouths could fuse together. Killian's tongue swept into my mouth and took ownership. The hand that had been on Noah's chest cupped the back of my head as he held me in

place. When we finally separated, our upper bodies were practically lying on top of the young men between us.

And they were now the ones watching us hungrily.

I couldn't say which one of us acted first, me or Killian. But when his eyes met mine and I saw the same need in his that I knew was in mine, I just knew. I didn't question it, though I knew I would later.

I just acted.

So did Killian.

As my eyes shifted to Liam, I heard him let out a little rush of air. Then his hand was snaking up to curl around the back of my neck. I swallowed his moan of satisfaction when our mouths met. His lips were softer than Killian's, but his kiss was just as confident, as domineering as my lover's. He welcomed my tongue eagerly into his mouth, then he was pushing into mine.

Tasting.

Licking.

Sucking.

The kiss was hot and wet and needy, and the only reason I broke it was because of the little whimpers I heard coming from the other side of the bed.

Killian was kissing Noah gently, letting the younger man adjust. The sight of my lover tasting another... tasting Noah... made my heart explode with joy. They were so fucking gorgeous together, and I loved knowing that Noah was the lucky recipient of Killian's giving mouth. I loved the way Noah's confidence quickly grew and he started kissing Killian more insistently.

When Killian broke the kiss, the pair stared at each other as if both were stunned by whatever they'd felt, then Killian looked at me. I heard a growl deep in his throat as he lunged forward to snag my mouth again. His kiss was rough and needy and impatient. When we ended the kiss, Killian was left leaning over Liam. Fire shone in both their eyes. Liam was the one who lifted up on his elbows so he could claim Killian's mouth. Their kiss was greedy and a clear battle of wills. Killian won, but I couldn't say Liam was really the loser because I knew what the magic of Killian's mouth was doing to him. My morning erection became uncomfortably painful. I reached beneath the blanket to try to ease some of the discomfort by rubbing my dick. I twisted my hips away from Liam so that I wouldn't

scare him, but his hand stole over my hip and gripped me hard, keeping me in the position.

It was utter insanity, what was happening. I told myself that we needed to stop it, but I couldn't make my body care about any of the red flags that were going off in my brain. I began kissing the back of Killian's neck as I slid my free hand over his ass. While he and I were wearing sweats, the young men between us weren't wearing a thing. The night before had been so crazy that we hadn't even considered that it might not be the best idea to have Noah and Liam go without clothing.

Killian stopped kissing Liam so he could kiss me, then he reared back and searched out Noah's mouth again. Noah eagerly kissed him back. My mouth was back on Liam's and I swore I could taste Killian there.

"Fuck, Zak," Liam groaned as we kissed. I broke the kiss only long enough so I could lean across him and taste Noah. Killian didn't hesitate to release the younger man. I barely let Noah pull in a breath before I crushed my mouth to his. Fingers twisted in my hair and someone's hand slid beneath my sweats to caress my ass, but I couldn't be one hundred percent sure whose hand was whose.

Noah's mouth was the softest of all the men. There was only the slightest hesitancy in his kiss but once we found a rhythm that worked for us, he was delving into my mouth and sliding his tongue over mine. He made the most delicious sounds as we kissed. They were as intoxicating as his sweet flavor. The hand on my ass gripped me hard, then a finger was sliding over my crack.

Killian's finger.

Other fingers closed around my dick as I began humping Liam's body while I consumed Noah's mouth and he mine.

It was a free-for-all after that.

Our positions meant Liam was the recipient of most of my weight as I pressed him into the mattress and kissed him long and deep. Killian had pushed my sweats down so my cock was exposed and sliding over Liam's. Liam had removed his hand from my cock and was currently gripping my ass in his palms as he tried to control the pace our dicks slid along each other's. "Harder, Zak. Harder," he demanded.

I wrapped my arms around him and did as he asked. I pretended like I was really fucking him. He opened his legs wider and cried out when it caused more of my cock to come into contact with his.

I looked over to see that Killian was on his back with Noah lying on top of him. They were still mostly just kissing, but I could see Noah's stiff cock pressed against Killian's body. I reached over to kiss Noah as we both rode the men beneath us. It was a heady experience and I was sure my entire body was just going to go up in flames.

The second we broke the kiss, Killian rolled Noah so that Noah was on his side facing Liam. Killian's big arms were wrapped around Noah's small waist. His mouth was latched onto Noah's neck. He began pumping his hips against Noah's backside. I could see from the tension in his expression that he was close. His eyes met mine. I quickly maneuvered myself and Liam so that Liam was facing Noah. I urged Liam forward until his and Noah's fronts were aligned. They began madly pumping their naked cocks together as they shared wet, hot, openmouthed kisses between them. I notched my dick against Liam's crack and began sliding my length between his firm cheeks. I could feel the tightness of his pucker along my shaft. It felt so fucking good that I wanted to push into him then and there.

My attention was stolen by Killian as he shoved his pants down and began moving behind Noah, probably doing the same as me. Noah tensed for a moment, but then his hand was seeking out Killian's thigh. I wasn't sure if Noah's momentary hesitation had come from the fact that Killian's huge cock was pressed between his ass cheeks or because of the extra little bit of Killian that Noah hadn't been expecting. The first time I'd seen the metal hoop that graced the head of Killian's monstrous cock, I'd been shocked.

And so fucking turned on.

When he'd pushed into me moments later as he'd held me against the wall of the bathroom stall, I'd actually come on the spot as the cool metal had slid along my inner walls. Three minutes later, I'd come again as he fucked me hard and deep.

The mere thought of Killian inside of me had me sliding my wet cock through Liam's crack fast and furious. Killian's and my movements caused Liam and Noah to pump against each other, and we quickly found a rhythm where we were all moving in sync... fucking each other as if we were one.

And technically, we weren't even actually fucking.

Noah came first. He cried out and began spewing all over Liam's cock. "Zak," Liam called as he desperately tried to find his release. I reached down to grab his wet cock and used Noah's semen to pump my hand along

his length. I could feel Noah's pulsing dick still shooting as aftershocks quaked through him. I reached across both men to kiss Killian as I fucked Liam's crack and pumped his dick. Liam screamed beneath me and as more hot cum coated my hand, Killian grabbed the back of my head.

"Fuck him hard, baby. Make him feel that big cock of yours."

The demand was like a sexual act in itself. I rocked hard against Liam and as I came, I felt Killian's hand close around my cock. He held my dick so that my load hit Liam's hole. The sight of it had me coming even more. Killian released me so he could finish himself off. His mouth was on Liam's, then Noah's as he came against Noah's ass. I would have given anything to see what his semen looked like all over Noah's pale, smooth skin, but I was too wiped out to move. I put an arm around Liam's waist as I tried to catch my breath.

A minute later, I was completely passed out, so fortunately, I didn't have time to consider what we'd all just done... and how it would change everything.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

NOAH

Noah, you have to stay here, do you understand me? They're coming.
No—

Stay here. Promise me. No matter what you hear, you stay right here and you don't make a sound. Not one sound, Noah! I love you, my boy.

"Noah? Noah!"

The sound of Liam's terrified voice had me snapping my head around. The walls of Killian's office came into focus so fast it was dizzying, adding to the nausea I was already feeling.

"Breathe, Noah. Fucking breathe!"

Liam's hands on my cheeks helped ground me, but it was the fear in his voice that had me doing as he said. I sucked in a breath and immediately felt some of the lightheadedness ease. I held the breath as Liam counted, even though I didn't feel like I was having trouble catching my breath this time.

It was more like I'd been trying not to breathe at all.

They might hear you if you breathe.

I ripped my face from Liam's hands as the voice gave me that dire warning.

My voice.

"Baby, I need you to focus on me," Liam whispered, then I felt his hands back on my face and his lips pressed to my temple.

Liam.

My Liam.

My Liam who loved me.

And who I'd hurt.

Reality was cold and harsh as the blackness of the daze I'd been in faded away. The first things I saw were the black and blue marks around the bandaged cut on Liam's temple. He'd said it was an accident, but the reality was that I was the reason he'd gotten hurt.

Only, I didn't remember any of it.

I only remembered falling asleep in Liam's arms and then waking up in Killian's as he'd carried me through the dark woods. I'd been so cold and wet... and scared.

So fucking scared.

I reached up to hold Liam's wrists like I always did and followed his instructions to hold my breath and release it. It was more that I needed the time to get my bearings than anything else.

"Better?" Liam asked worriedly.

I nodded.

I was sitting on the couch in Killian's office, his sketchpad in my lap. Waldo was sitting along my hip. I quickly picked him up to make sure I hadn't inadvertently hurt him during whatever had been happening to me this time. It hadn't been a nightmare, really, because I hadn't been asleep.

And because I could still remember the words in my head.

And my father's firm voice as he'd spoken them.

I hadn't heard his voice in a really long time... I'd had to read his journal with my own voice in my head because for some reason, I hadn't been able to remember what his had sounded like.

Until now.

"I think he's okay," Liam said as I examined Waldo. "When I came in, you were sitting here like you are now... just sitting."

I nodded. That was a relief. I wouldn't have been able to forgive myself if I'd hurt Waldo. Just like I couldn't forgive myself for hurting Liam.

I reached up to touch the injury on Liam's head.

"I'm okay," he assured me. "I hardly even feel it."

Liam was sitting in front of me on the small couch. I rolled my eyes at him as I eased Waldo back into the spot next to me. I found a blank page in the sketchpad and wrote *liar* on it, then showed it to him.

He grinned. "Okay, fine, I have a little headache but that's it. I swear."

You should be lying down.

"I was," Liam responded. "Got kind of lonely, though."

This time it was my turn to smile. He hesitated, then leaned in to kiss me. It was only when I kissed him back that he seemed to relax.

“Not a dream,” he murmured, then he was kissing me more deeply.

Definitely not a dream.

Though what had happened that morning sure as hell had felt like one. I felt my cheeks heat at the memory of Killian’s mouth moving over mine, of his cock pressed against my ass as I’d ground my hips against Liam’s.

I wrote *Zak and Killian?* on the sketchpad and showed it to Liam. I saw his cheeks fill with color.

Nerves jangled in my belly as I waited for his response. Although he’d clearly enjoyed what had happened, that didn’t mean he didn’t regret it. After all, I’d kissed another man – two, actually – and I’d let them bring me pleasure in a way that should have only belonged to Liam. But I couldn’t find it in myself to wish it hadn’t happened. I’d loved watching Zak and Liam together. And him and Killian too. There was something about how the men treated him that made it feel like he was getting something I couldn’t give him... or that I didn’t know how to yet. Liam had always been the protector, the strong one. But with Killian and Zak, it seemed like he could let his walls down a little... like he *was* letting his walls down.

“I’m not sure where they are. I didn’t see them downstairs when I got up.”

Liam and I had drifted back to sleep after the encounter with Zak and Killian. When we’d woken up, both men had been gone and we’d heard the shower running. Liam had taken my hand and led me back to our room. We’d showered as well but hadn’t talked. We’d gotten into our bed and slept a little while longer, but I’d been feeling restless, so I’d left Liam to sleep and I’d come to Killian’s office to work on the design of Waldo’s prototype. But admittedly, it’d been hard to focus, and I hadn’t really gotten much done on the design.

“Are you... are you okay about what happened this morning?” Liam asked. Before I could answer he added, “Because I would never let anyone touch you because you’re mine and I love you, but I saw them kissing and they were so beautiful together and it reminded me of us and how good you make me feel and I... Jesus...” Liam let out the frustrated word and dropped his head so he could run his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know why I fucking did it. If it’d been anyone else touching you, I would have—”

I grabbed his hand because it looked like he was going to rip his hair out with how hard he was tugging on it.

I wrote on the notepad. I hated that I couldn't say the words to him again, but whatever strength I'd had last night to push past the darkness that always tried to suck me under when I spoke wasn't with me today.

Me too.

I waited until Liam was looking at me before I wrote my next note.

I love you.

Liam went from nervous and jittery to awed and disbelieving.

"You do?" he whispered.

I nodded. I pointed at my heart and then put his hand over the spot. A huge smile graced Liam's mouth right before he leaned in and kissed me. It wasn't a gentle or soft kiss. It was all-consuming, hot, demanding. And the only thing that kept me from crawling into his lap was Waldo's irritated squawk as he got caught up in the shuffle of our bodies.

Liam chuckled when he pulled back. I was smiling too. "I love you."

I caressed his face and studied him for a moment. Then I wrote another note down and hoped like hell it didn't mess up what had just happened between us.

They're different.

Liam seemed to read the note a few times before he said, "Yes, they are."

Neither of us seemed ready to try and expound on why Killian and Zak were different from just some random guys we'd gotten carried away with, so we both just sat there for a moment and watched each other. Liam reached out to tuck my hair behind my ear. "How about I go make us some lunch?"

I nodded.

"Will you be all right up here by yourself?"

I nodded again, then wrote, *I'll come down in a bit.*

Liam seemed reluctant to leave me, but he didn't argue. I was glad because I needed a few more minutes to collect myself, and I really did want to try and finish the design on the beak so I could talk to Killian about what materials he'd need to buy for the first printing of the prototype.

Liam kissed me briefly and left the room. Waldo squawked at me when my eyes stayed on the door Liam had disappeared through.

I let my fingers slide over the toucan's head. I tried to get the sound of the first letter of his name out, but the second I did, I heard my father's voice in my head.

Noah, they're coming...

I shook my head and forced myself to focus on the cracks that were appearing on Waldo's artificial beak.

Waldo. You need to help Waldo.

I pulled in a few breaths and turned my attention back to the design, but all I could think about was my foolishness for actually thinking I could be normal for Liam... and two other men who were becoming far more important to me than they probably should.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

KILLIAN

“**T**hought I’d find you here,” I murmured to Zak as I settled myself next to him on the damp log. There was a chill in the air but with the sun shining brightly overhead, it wasn’t too uncomfortable out. Winters in northwestern Pennsylvania could be harsh, but every once in a while Mother Nature would hold off on unleashing her full fury. Today was one of those perfect days between the change of seasons.

Zak didn’t respond but I didn’t miss how he wiped at his eyes. I had a profile view of him, so I could tell he’d been crying. He didn’t even try to hide that fact from me... it was proof of how truly distressed he was.

Our spot was a little clearing by the same stream I’d found Noah at the previous night. After we’d bought the house, Zak and I had taken lots of walks down to this very spot to watch the sun set. That’d changed after I’d started drinking more heavily. Zak had continued to walk on his own, but I’d used the opportunity to sneak alcohol.

“When was the last time you came out here?” I asked.

Zak shook his head. “Not sure.” His voice was thick with emotion. I wanted to reach out and touch him, but truthfully, I had no clue where we were at. Things had spun completely out of control ever since Liam had announced the night before that he and Noah were leaving. Zak and I hadn’t had time to talk like we really needed to, and then this morning had happened...

I watched the sunshine dance over the water as I tried to contemplate the repercussions that could be coming. Twenty-four hours earlier I’d accepted that I was going to lose Zak. I’d been willing to let him go because

I couldn't get my shit together. But last night he'd said I didn't get to give up on us. I'd been clinging to his words ever since.

That was before I'd kissed not one, but two men in our bed and in front of the only man who'd ever meant anything to me. Kissed and done a whole lot more. And I'd allowed Zak to do the same things.

I'd shared him with someone else.

But it didn't really feel like sharing... that word didn't fit for some reason.

And they weren't just someone else... they were Liam and Noah.

None of it made any fucking sense, but I couldn't deny something major had just occurred.

How would I be able to keep Zak after this? We already had so many things to overcome because of my behavior.

"Killian," Zak whispered brokenly. He was staring at the water too. I looked at him and saw the pain etched into every line of his face.

I turned my body and straddled the log so I could look at Zak... reach for him if he let me.

"Zak, I love you so fucking much. I can't explain what happened this morning, but I swear on my life, it doesn't take away even a little bit from what I feel for you."

Zak began sobbing as he covered his eyes with his hand. He was one of the toughest men I'd ever met, but even he had his limits and I knew I'd pushed him so far past them that it was a miracle he was still here. I scooted closer to him and put my arms around him. I kissed the top of his head as he turned into me and just cried his heart out.

"It's okay," I whispered repeatedly as he clung to me. When he quieted, I just held him for a while. My gut churned as I struggled to get my next words out. "I've been seeing his ghost, Zak."

Zak stiffened the tiniest bit, then put a fraction of space between us. I dropped my eyes when I felt his gaze on me. "Whose? That boy's? Ryder?"

I nodded my head at the mention of the teenager I'd killed. "I mean, I don't think he's actually haunting me or anything, but..."

"But he is," Zak said softly.

"Yeah," I agreed. I didn't truly believe I was seeing the kid's spirit, but his image and his voice would appear in my head when I was least expecting it.

"Has it been like that the whole time?" Zak asked.

“Yes,” I admitted. “He always looks the same, says the same thing.”

I felt Zak’s fingers curl into mine. “Tell me.”

It was hard to get the words past my lips because I’d never spoken to anyone about that day. Zak knew the general details from the press coverage, but I’d never told him anything beyond that I’d killed young Ryder Stanfield because I’d had no choice. I’d treated Zak like the shrink I’d been forced to see... I’d said I was fine, that I’d just been doing my job, that I regretted taking a life but that I understood it wasn’t my fault.

“We were waiting for the hostage negotiator to show up,” I began. “But Ryder was agitated and making threats. He still had maybe a dozen classmates in the room with him.”

“And the teacher, right? He was also Ryder’s soccer coach.”

I nodded. “The room didn’t have good access points. No external windows, one door. I was talking to Ryder from the door to try and keep him calm. But his teacher just kept goading him. Kept saying he hadn’t touched Ryder like Ryder wanted him to admit that he had. We knew the asshole was lying... our tech people found pictures almost as soon as they got into his cloud account. I tried telling Ryder we believed him, but he wanted the teacher to admit to molesting him. He was so fucked up in the head, Zak,” I whispered.

Zak squeezed my hand but didn’t say anything.

“I really thought I’d be able to talk him down. I established a connection with him, told him that we’d make sure the teacher was held accountable. I think he wanted to believe me, but the teacher started going off about how Ryder was going to prison for the rest of his life.”

“He’d shot the security guard in the leg while getting into the school, right?” Zak said.

I nodded. “It was a flesh wound. Ryder kept begging me to tell the officer he was sorry. I... I thought I’d lose him to himself, you know.”

Zak nodded.

“He started releasing hostages. All he really wanted was the teacher to tell the truth. But then the teacher started telling Ryder that he’d wanted it... had asked for it... had enjoyed it. Ryder screamed at him to stop saying that shit and then he started shooting in his direction. The teacher, coward that he was, used a girl that was trying to leave the room as cover. Ryder was so far gone that I don’t think he knew what he was doing.”

“You had to do it, Killian. I know you’ve heard that so many times now, but I know you. I know you better than anyone, even yourself. And I know you did everything you absolutely could to save that boy.”

I let the tears that had been stinging the backs of my eyes fall. “I kept yelling his name and telling him to stop, but when he swung that gun in the direction of the girl, I just couldn’t...”

“I know, baby,” Zak said gently. This time he was the one taking me into *his* arms.

“You have to go for the kill shot even when you don’t want to,” I explained desperately. “If the subject is a danger to others, you have to shoot to kill or—” I lost it as the rest of the words failed me. I buried my face against Zak’s chest.

“I know, Killian. We had the same thing. Women, kids, didn’t matter... they were non-friendlies until you were able to prove that they weren’t.”

I nodded against him. If anyone would have understood, it was Zak, but I’d been so ashamed of what I’d done, of the life I’d had to take, that I’d secretly feared Zak would judge me. It’d been the reason that I’d started to see Ryder everywhere and hear the final words he’d spoken to me.

“When I got to him, he was still breathing but bleeding out fast. You want to know what he said to me?” I asked bitterly. “He told me he was sorry. *He* was sorry. The kid was a fucking victim who was desperate for someone to believe him, to help him, and *he* was the one telling *me* he was sorry.” I let out a harsh laugh. “*I’m sorry, Killian.*”

“He used your name?” Zak asked.

I nodded. “I told him what it was when I was trying to establish trust with him. Now it fucking haunts me.”

“Why haven’t you ever told me any of this?” Zak eased me back a little so he could look me in the eye. He cupped my face. “Did you think I would judge you?”

My silence was answer enough. I could tell that hurt Zak, but he didn’t pull away from me. “I wouldn’t have, Killian. I *don’t*.”

“I was so fucking scared of losing you, Zak, that I just couldn’t get past anything else. The last thing I wanted to admit to you was how badly I’d failed... how not only had I not saved a life, but that I’d taken one too. He was innocent, Zak. Logically, I know he was guilty of some things and he endangered lives, but in here,” – I punched at my chest – “he was an innocent kid who just needed saving. And I couldn’t give that to him.”

“Killian,” Zak murmured, then he kissed my forehead, my damp cheeks. “You didn’t fail Ryder, and you most certainly didn’t fail me. When I think of all the lives you’ve saved, all the ones you’ve made better, I just keep asking myself what I did so right in my life to deserve you.”

“You’re you,” I said simply, because there was no other explanation.

“Then why do I feel like I’m still going to lose you?” he whispered.

“You’re not. I’m going to get help, Zak. Delia knows a therapist I can talk to, and if I have to live at AA for the foreseeable future, I will.”

Zak’s thumbs stroked over my cheeks as he regarded me. He leaned in and kissed me softly, then put his head against my chest. I held him and murmured, “That’s not the part you’re upset about, is it?”

Zak shook his head. “I wasn’t going to lose you to your demons, Killian. Not again. I’ll be in the bunk next to yours at those AA meetings.”

I couldn’t help but smile.

“I can fight what makes sense, Killian, but the things that don’t…”

“You’re worried about what happened this morning,” I said.

He didn’t respond.

“Did you like what happened?”

“I shouldn’t have,” was his answer.

“Why?” I asked. “Because you think it means you love me *less*? Because I sure as hell know I enjoyed it, but my feelings for you haven’t changed.”

“No,” Zak said quickly. “I love you so much, Killian.”

“They were beautiful to watch together, Zak. And right or wrong, you and I found pleasure in that… in them. I loved watching you with them. You’re so giving and passionate and you feel everything in here,” I said as I covered his heart with my hand. “And they weren’t just some guys we decided to fuck around with just to amuse ourselves.”

“No,” he agreed quickly.

“You didn’t cheat on me, Zak. Not physically and not emotionally.”

“But what if I did?” he whispered. “What if I felt things I shouldn’t?”

“Then I think you’re not the only one guilty of that,” I admitted. “I wanted what happened because you were there with me. I wanted it because it was Noah and Liam. Last night was an emotional, scary night that left us all feeling confused and shaken up… why *wouldn’t* we all want to find comfort with each other?” I knew I was downplaying things, but I didn’t

really know what else to say. Zak and I were in the same boat... dealing with emotions neither of us had been expecting.

“So what happens now?”

“Now, I think we go home and get warmed up and make sure our guests are okay and that they know they have a place to stay for as long as they need. Then I think you and I need to talk some more.” I kissed him. “A lot more,” I murmured. I kissed him again. He opened his mouth beneath mine. I pulled him forward, but it took little encouragement to have him straddling my lap. The move put his mouth higher than mine.

“God, Killian, I’ve missed you so much.”

“I never meant to hurt you, Zak. I’m so sorr—”

That was all I managed to get out before he crushed his mouth down on mine. “Need you,” he breathed against my lips. “Now, Killian.”

He began tearing at my zipper. “Babe, I—”

He kissed me.

“Don’t.”

He kissed me again.

“Have.”

And again.

“Any stuff.”

“Don’t care,” Zak said as he freed my cock and began fisting it.

“Fuck,” I gasped as I basically saw stars.

“Right here,” Zak said. “In our spot.”

“Zak—”

Zak dropped to his knees and sucked me to the back of his throat before I could utter another syllable.

“Jesus Christ!” I shouted as I instinctively thrust up into his hot mouth. I grabbed him by the back of the head to hold him still as I jammed my dick down his throat. He gagged and choked but didn’t protest the rough treatment. In fact, when I tried to pull back a little, he violently shook his head and closed his lips around my dick so he could suck on me.

“My boy likes it rough,” I murmured as I petted Zak’s hair and continued to choke him with my dick. Zak moaned and worked even harder to apply pressure to my shaft. I knew it’d been too long since I’d fucked him like this and I’d never last, so I allowed him another couple of drags, then forced him to release me. I climbed to my feet, taking him with me.

My hands worked frantically to open his pants as I made love to his mouth. I could taste myself on him.

“Missed you so much,” I whispered.

Zak stroked my face and stared at me like he couldn’t believe I was really there. I swore to myself I’d never give him a reason to carry that kind of doubt around with him ever again. I got his pants open and pumped his dick a few times, then spun him and bent him over the log. I dropped to my knees behind him, split his cheeks open with my hands and closed my mouth over his hole. Zak cried out in pleasure as I began to greedily kiss, lick, and suck him. He was a babbling mess by the time I had his hole loosened enough to take one of my wet fingers, then two. I found his prostate and massaged it a few times for good measure, then opened him up for my tongue again.

“Fuck, Killian, I need you inside me. Please!”

“Almost there, baby,” I mouthed against his perfect ass. I lapped at his hole a few more times, then used my fingers to spread him open as far as I could. I spit into his hole several times. I didn’t particularly like using spit for lube, but it wasn’t the first time our passion had caught us unprepared. I stood up and pulled my shirt out of the way so I could dribble copious amounts of saliva on my flushed cock. I rubbed my Prince Albert piercing along Zak’s crack as I got myself as wet as I could. Zak moaned and shoved his ass back on me. I gave him a hard slap to remind him who was in charge. That just had Zak moaning more.

But he did hold still.

“Gonna be hard and fast,” I warned Zak as I spit into my hand and rubbed the moisture around on my wet dick.

“Prove it,” my man responded sassily as he looked over his shoulder at me. His lips were swollen and red from blowing me and his skin was flushed from the pleasure I’d been teasing him with.

I leaned over his back and placed my cock at his opening. I used my free hand to shove his shirt up so I could kiss his back as I began pressing inside of him. Zak relaxed his body to accommodate mine and pushed back against me. We both let out a little shout when my head cleared his tight ring of muscles. Both the pressure on my dick and the little tug on my piercing made my brain feel like it was going to implode. I pulled back a fraction of an inch, then pushed in hard.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Zak breathed as he braced himself on the log. I pulled out and pushed in a few more times, then almost all the way out so I could dribble more spit on my shaft. Then I shoved into him hard and deep.

“Yes, Killian!” Zak cried out. His knees buckled under my weight, so I put my arm around his waist and propped one of my feet up on a smaller branch of the fallen tree. I worked myself inside him until my balls slapped against his ass. I didn’t give him any time to adjust because I knew he didn’t really want it, and because I knew I wasn’t going to last as it was. I began thrusting into him in long, heavy drags. Every time my piercing rubbed over his prostate, Zak jumped beneath me and his ass muscles gripped me even tighter. Within minutes, I was slinging in and out of him. Sweat was pouring off my brow and hitting his back as he met my harsh pounding with his hips.

I reached down to wrap an arm around his throat and dragged him upright. It changed the angle for both of us. Zak grabbed my forearm so he had something to hang onto while I fucked him. I used my free hand to start jacking him off. His dick was soaking wet from all the pre-cum. Between my spit and my own juices, my cock was easily sliding in and out of his body. Our flesh slapped together and our moans filled the air around us. I turned Zak’s head so I could kiss him, and I held him like that as we raced toward the finish line. It was all I could do to get him to come first, but the second I felt his ass muscles clamp down on my dick and his jizz hit my arm where it was still lashed across his upper chest, I let go myself. I growled in his ear as the orgasm rocked through me. I released his dick and wrapped my other arm around him so I could hold him completely still as I jerked and spasmed inside of him. Zak’s body continued to quake with pleasure as I unloaded in his tight channel. It felt like my balls were going to completely dry out by the time the orgasm started to ease. I’d pumped so much semen inside of him that I could feel it dripping down the base of my dick and over my balls.

Zak and I could barely breathe as we stayed locked in the heated embrace. When oxygen finally began returning to my starved lungs, I sought out Zak’s mouth. We stayed like that until the air became too cool to stand anymore. We did our best to use the water from the stream to clean up with and then began the short walk home. I reached out to grab Zak’s hand as we walked and when he smiled at me, I felt like I’d just hung the stars and the moon all by myself.

But as sated and as content as I was at the moment, I couldn't deny that I was also excited to get home and check on Noah and Liam. One look at Zak and I knew he was thinking the same thing.

Maybe if we were lucky, we'd get to walk in on the young men having a little fun of their own.

And if we were really, really lucky, maybe they wouldn't mind an audience... or more.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

LIAM

Nerves jangled through me when the back door opened to reveal Killian and Zak. They didn't notice me at first because they were too busy exchanging little kisses as Killian tugged Zak into the kitchen, but once they did, they separated and I was sure they both started blushing.

"Oh, hey," Killian said as he fingered his lips.

I could still feel those lips on mine.

My blood felt like it began to boil inside my veins as my gaze shifted to Zak. God, I'd been so close to asking him to fuck me that morning. The feel of his cum hitting my hole... fucking heaven.

I found myself dropping my eyes to Zak's crotch before I realized what I was doing.

"Hey," I choked out as I forced my eyes back to the bowl I was dumping cans of tuna in.

There was an awkward silence as the men began shucking off their coats and greeting the various dogs and cats that were hanging out in the kitchen with me.

"Where's Noah?" Killian asked as he approached me. I felt myself tense up. My traitorous dick actually began to stiffen in anticipation.

"Uh, he's in your office. He's working on something in your sketchpad. He's got Waldo with him."

"Oh good," Killian said. His voice sounded a little uneven. I heard him washing his hands behind me. Zak joined him, shooting me a quick look as he passed. Both men were now behind me. I glanced over my shoulder to see them washing their hands side by side. Every once in a while they'd

shift their bodies as they briefly kissed each other, and I could see they were actually washing each other's hands.

My heart jumped at the displays of affection.

Had they finally talked? Were things between them on the mend?

I quickly turned my attention back to the can of tuna I was opening when the water turned off.

"What are you making?" Killian asked when he appeared at my side a second later. He was drying his hands. I couldn't stop checking out the smooth silver ring he had on his pointer finger or the leather bracelet that adorned one wrist. Not to mention his tattoos were drool-worthy.

"Tuna," I managed to get out. "I, uh, wanted to save as many of the vegetables from last night as I could, and you guys don't have a lot of stuff in your fridge but I found a few cans of tuna and you had some bread so I thought tuna and... bread."

Jesus, Liam, stop talking!

"I love tuna," Killian said. I watched as he swiped a finger through the mound of tuna I already had sitting on top of the mayonnaise mixture. I was sure I was drooling as I watched Killian lick his finger. Then Zak was there licking off the rest.

"Fuck, it's amazing, Liam," Killian said.

I heard the words, but I was too busy drowning in a haze of lust to respond.

Because I'd gotten a whiff of Zak.

He smelled like man and sweat and earth, which on its own made a great combination, but it was the distinct smell of sex that had my cock going from uncomfortable woody to full-on-hot-poker in my pants.

Had the guys been outside fucking?

"Liam?"

Someone gave me a little shake. It was Zak.

"You smell," I blurted when I found myself looking at Zak's dick again. Then, God help me, his ass. A good ten seconds of silence passed before I heard my own words. "No, you don't smell. I mean, you do, but like outside. You smell like outside... like you've been outside!"

Zak and Killian exchanged concerned looks. I didn't blame them. I was sounding like a crazy person.

"Were you outside?" I asked as I began tearing at the lid of the tuna.

"Um, yeah," Killian said, then reminded me, "We just came in."

“Oh, right, yeah, no, I meant, were you enjoying yourself outside before you came inside... *the house*... before you came inside *the house*?”

Jesusfuckingchrist!

“Not that you have to tell me what you were doing outside! I just hope whatever it was, you worked up an appetite.”

Holy hell, could my voice go any higher?

“Or not... *fuck*.”

I swore I heard Killian chuckling as my face went up in flames. Zak’s mouth settled near my ear as he said, “Good morning, Liam.” He gave me a quick kiss on my cheek and added, “We had a really nice time outside... maybe you and Noah can join us next time.”

I ripped the lid off the can so hard that tuna splattered all over the place. Two of the cats who’d been sitting on the kitchen island stools flew off them to race to get to all the tuna that had hit the floor.

“Shit,” I muttered as I eyed the mess. Zak began laughing. I couldn’t help but smile as well. I took a swipe at him, but he dodged the blow.

“I’ll set the table.”

Killian grabbed me and gave me a quick hug and kissed my temple. “Glad you’re still here, Liam,” he said softly.

I couldn’t help but reach for his arm and hang on to it for a moment with my fingers.

Me too.

This time, I managed to keep the words to myself.

Killian released me and began cleaning up the mess I’d made.

“Need help with anything else?” Zak asked when he was done setting the table. I’d finished mixing the tuna.

“No, this just needs to chill for a bit. I’ll toast the bread a few minutes before we’re ready to eat.”

Zak and Killian had already sat down at the table. They couldn’t seem to stop touching each other. I was thrilled for them, but also really envious. I busied myself with preparing the mixed salad I wanted to serve with the tuna.

“Liam, Zak and I wanted to talk to you a bit more about what happened last night.”

I felt my cheeks heating as I shot them both a glance.

“Not that part,” Zak said with a smile. The smile faltered a moment later when he added, “But we do need to talk about that too. Maybe once Noah

has joined us?”

I didn't really want to talk about either topic. I just wanted things to fit into place easily, like when you had only a couple of pieces to go when assembling a jigsaw puzzle. I wanted Zak and Killian to touch me and Noah like they touched each other. I wanted to be able to touch them without having to worry about what it meant. I wanted Noah to get better so I never had to witness the terror in his eyes that I had last night as he'd pushed me off him and fled the house.

“Okay,” I murmured.

“Can you tell us what happened last night? After Zak and I left the room?” Killian asked.

“Um, Noah fell asleep, so I didn't want to wake him to move him to our room... I mean, the guest room. I got him undressed and cleaned him up so he'd be more comfortable and then I fell asleep too. I woke up when he started moaning and thrashing. I tried to wake him, but he suddenly opened his eyes. When he saw me it was like... like he was seeing through me.” I felt sick to my stomach as I remembered how calling Noah's name had had absolutely no effect on him. “He pushed me, and I lost my balance and fell off the couch. I hit my head on the coffee table. You know the rest.”

“Is that the first time anything like that has happened?” Zak asked.

I nodded. “He's had a couple of nightmares before, but never like that. I don't know what it was like while I was at college, but my dad and his aunt never mentioned anything about it when I came home for holidays.”

“What about after you two left home?” Killian asked.

I shook my head. “He had one or two at the most.” I glanced at both men. “He's had more here in the last week than the entire time we lived on the streets.”

Both men exchanged a glance. I didn't vocalize that I thought that was strange too.

“Has Noah ever talked about his father or what happened to him?” Zak asked.

“No. Why?” I said as I stopped what I was doing to turn and face the men.

“You said he stopped talking after his father was killed. That was the term you used. Killed. Not died.”

“That's how Noah's aunt described it,” I said. How had I not noticed that before? “So you think the trauma of how his father died might have

something to do with Noah not talking?”

“It’s possible,” Zak said. “We have kids who come into the ER all the time and won’t talk due to some traumatic event. Usually, that changes over time when they start to feel more comfortable or are reunited with a loved one. Sometimes they need therapy to deal with it. I’ve never met anyone with a case like Noah’s,” Zak admitted. “But it makes sense that if the trauma was never dealt with, then it could still be causing the mutism. When a child stops talking, it’s often because the brain is trying to protect the child from the memory of the event.”

I moved to the table and sat down. “I don’t know anything else about how his father died.”

“You said he was some kind of doctor doing missionary work, right?” Killian pointed out gently.

I nodded. “Yes, in South Africa somewhere.”

“That’s good,” Zak said. “Since we know the approximate year and location, we might be able to find something about it on the internet. If not, I know a couple of people who’ve worked for Doctors Without Borders... they may be able to point us in the right direction. They have a heavy presence in that region.”

“Do you... do you think I did something wrong last night?” I whispered. “Do you think I scared him somehow and that’s why he ran?”

“No,” Killian and Zak said almost in unison. Zak’s hand covered mine. “No,” Zak repeated. “My guess is that all this is starting to catch up to him... that the memories are starting to come back in bits and pieces for some reason. But from what we’ve seen, you’re the only one who makes Noah feel safe. If anything, *that* could be the reason his brain is starting to unlock that memory.”

I shook my head. “Not me,” I said. “You... this place.” I looked around the room at all the animals. “All this started when you guys gave him... *us*... a safe place to recover.”

“Liam,” Killian said, waiting until I looked at him to continue. “We’ve seen how he is with you. You’re home for him. You’re that anchor. Don’t ever doubt that.”

I nodded my head. He was right.

“Liam, last night when Noah said your name, did you notice how pale he looked? Like it was physically making him sick?”

I shook my head. “No. I was too messed up myself last night,” I admitted. “But that happens when he tries to write stuff down, too. I used to try and get him to tell me things about himself and his childhood by writing them down... like what his favorite foods were, his hobbies, movies he liked, stuff like that. Every time he tried, he’d start shaking and sweating and breathing funny... like he was scared to death. I stopped asking and I figured out how to learn those things in a different way.”

“How did you do that?” Zak asked.

“Trial and error, mostly. He’ll usually answer yes and no questions. So if I wanted to know what kind of movies he liked, I’d start by asking him if he liked a certain genre. I also picked up on the types of books he liked to read. I learned a few things about when he was really young from his father’s journal.”

“He had a journal from his father?” Killian asked.

I nodded. “It was his most prized possession. He always had it with him and I’m betting he read it thousands of times. It was dated the year Noah was born and chronicled the first few years of his life. I only read a couple of entries because I didn’t want to violate his privacy.” I looked at both men and quickly added, “I only read those entries because I was taping pages of the journal back together after my dad tore them up.”

“Your father tore Noah’s journal up?” Killian practically growled.

“Yeah. I, uh, thought it was this guy who used to pick on Noah at school at first. But after my dad attacked Noah that day in my room, I asked Noah if it was my dad who’d done it. I guess Noah had been trying to protect me from knowing the truth about what an asshole my father was... is.”

“What happened to the journal?” Zak asked. “You and Noah didn’t have any belongings when the cops brought you into the ER.”

“We had to leave the journal behind at my house. It was still in the room with my dad and we were in such a panic that we didn’t even think about it. Noah was heartbroken about losing it, but we couldn’t risk going back to get it. Most of the stuff Noah and I had, like our sleeping bag and stuff, got stolen by the guys who beat me up. I lost my wallet and the few personal belongings I’d had in my luggage within a few days of living on the streets. It was one of the reasons it was so tough to find a legitimate job... everyone wants to see ID these days.”

Zak was still touching my hand. He gave it a squeeze, but I couldn’t bring myself to look at either man. They were surely thinking about what

kind of “work” I’d resorted to in order to feed Noah and myself. Hell, that’s what I was thinking about now.

Which brought up another issue that I’d been thinking about since the night before. I forced myself to look at Zak. “Um, when you have a second, can I talk to you about something?”

“Of course,” Zak said.

Shame went through me as I dropped my eyes again. Not surprisingly, Killian said, “I think I’ll go check on Noah. I have a few things I want to show him about the materials for Waldo’s beak that I’ve found.”

So that was what Noah had been working on with Killian. I’d noticed that Waldo had an artificial beak and that there were cracks forming where the screws were, but I hadn’t even considered that Noah was participating in a project related to the toucan. I desperately wanted to know more about what it was Killian and Noah were planning, but my need to talk to Zak was greater.

A good minute passed after Killian left the room before Zak shifted his chair closer to mine and urged, “Liam, you can talk to me about anything.”

I nodded, but it was still hard to get the words out. “I, um... can you help me get tested?”

Zak didn’t even hesitate a beat before saying, “Yes.” His thumb began running over mine in a soothing manner. “Do you think you might have been exposed to something?”

I shrugged my shoulders. I was sure there couldn’t be a more humiliating topic to talk about. “I always made the guys wear condoms, even for oral. And the ones who refused weren’t able to force...”

My voice dropped off as I remembered how close I’d come a few times to not being able to get away from guys who’d turned aggressive fast. I’d always prided myself on picking guys I thought I could handle, but a few had turned out to be more vicious than they’d appeared. I’d taken to carrying a small knife on me, which had saved me on more than one occasion.

“I sometimes help at a small clinic in the next town over. I can take you there. They’ll let me draw the blood myself.”

“I don’t have insurance—”

“Don’t worry about that. The only charge will be a lab fee, and we can cover the cost of that.”

“No, Zak, I—”

Zak suddenly leaned forward and kissed me softly on the mouth. “Just trust us to take care of you a little longer, okay, Liam?”

I nodded. He might have meant his kiss to be more about comfort, but my body was coming alive with desire.

“Once I get tested, if everything checks out, is it okay for me and Noah to... you know?” I asked.

“Definitely. You’ll want to use condoms during intercourse, of course. With your history, I would suggest you continue to use them for a couple of months until you undergo a second round of testing.” Zak hesitated before asking, “Do you think Noah needs to get tested too?”

“I don’t think so. I believe him when he says that my dad didn’t hurt him before that one day, and I stopped him before he could.” I bit into my lower lip as I remembered the sight of my own father assaulting another human being like that. I blinked back the tears that were threatening. “And I made sure no one touched him on the street. But I don’t know for sure if he was with someone while I was at college.”

I sat there, still as stone, hoping and praying that Zak would move on to another topic or, better yet, just get up and leave me to my self-pity. But when his hand came out to cradle my cheek, I closed my eyes and some of the tears escaped.

“What happened to Noah isn’t your fault,” Zak whispered.

“How could I not see what he was really like?” I croaked.

“The most dangerous monsters know how to hide among us. When I was growing up, I stayed with a lot of what were considered the most respectable, upstanding families. Lots of money, highly religious, you name it... there was always something that my case worker would say made me lucky to be staying with the family. I saw a lot of shit in those families... the stuff they made sure no one on the outside saw. And you know what? At first, I didn’t care. I just wanted them to love me. I wanted them to call me their real son or brother or whatever.”

“You grew up in foster care?” I asked as I wiped at my tears.

“For most of my life. My mom left me inside a grocery store bathroom when I was four. I don’t remember much about her and I don’t remember having a father at all. I spent the whole night in that bathroom waiting for her to come back. When one of the employees checked the bathroom before locking up the store, I hid behind the garbage can.”

“Did you ever see her again?” I asked.

Zak straightened in his chair a bit. “No. The cops eventually found the motel room we’d been living in, but she was long gone. I’ve worked in medicine long enough to know that she did me a favor. There were a lot of places she could have chosen to leave me where I wouldn’t have been found in time.”

“But you didn’t think that at the time,” I said.

Zak dropped his eyes and shook his head. “No, I didn’t. I just wanted to know what I’d done wrong to make her not love me anymore. When my first foster family gave me back to CPS after just a few days, I figured there must be something wrong with me. Then I got a new family that planned to adopt me. That lasted until the mom found out she was pregnant... less than two months.”

“How many families did you go through?”

“Before or after I wised up?” Zak asked, his voice just a bit uneven. I could tell by the words he was using that he was trying to pretend the whole thing hadn’t affected him, but he would have had to be dead inside not to feel anything.

“More than I can count on both hands,” Zak finally said. “I remember asking my case worker once why families kept giving me back. She said some families were just looking for more independent kids. I had to look the word up,” Zak said with a harsh chuckle. “I was kind of a clingy kid... I didn’t like to be left alone for too long. I didn’t realize until I was in nursing school that what I’d had was an actual problem. Fear of abandonment. It carried over into my relationships as well.”

“Even with Killian?”

“*Especially* with Killian,” Zak said. “I was always waiting for him to leave and when he didn’t, I got mad. *Really* mad. I said some shitty things to him.”

“You tried to force him to leave you,” I observed.

Zak nodded. “He called me on my shit. We’ve been together ever since.”

He smiled, and I felt it flow through me like water. It was the first genuine smile I’d seen on him. “You two talked,” I said. “Outside.” I tried to remind myself not to think about what else the pair had been doing outside.

Zak blushed.

Actually blushed.

“We did,” he said softly. “We still have a lot we need to work through —”

“You will,” I interjected. “I’ve never seen two people who were meant for each other more than you and Killian.”

“I have,” Zak responded. “I’m looking at one of them and the other is probably letting Killian talk his ear off with stuff about resins and *poly-fiber-carbon* jargon.”

I found myself smiling. Noah was most definitely my other half.

I couldn’t help but stare at Zak as a voice in my head wondered if maybe my math wasn’t just a little bit off. But I supposed there wasn’t such a thing as having people be your other quarters.

“Will your tuna be okay for a bit?” Zak asked.

“Yeah, it should be fine. Why?”

“How about you and I go take a run to the clinic and then we’ll go to the grocery store afterwards? Maybe we can cook our men something nice for dinner together?”

Our men.

God, that sounded really good.

Only, I knew I wasn’t hearing it the way Zak had meant it.

But I kept that to myself and nodded. “I’d like that, Zak.”

“Good,” Zak said, then he leaned forward and I realized he was going to kiss me again. But he seemed to catch himself at the last minute and he veered off course and kissed my forehead instead. Then he mumbled something about going to tell Killian that we’d be back soon and made a quick exit.

I used the time to get over the strange sense of unexpected loss I felt and then got up to follow him so I could check on Noah before we left.

My Noah.

Zak’s Killian.

His and mine.

Not *ours*.

That was the way it was supposed to be.

So why did I feel so damn disappointed?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ZAK

“K illian,” I said before Killian could open his car door.
“Yeah?”

I could feel his eyes on me, but I was having trouble looking up. “I kissed Liam today,” I whispered. I nearly choked on how thick my throat felt. “It just kind of happened. It was really fast and I was just trying to comfort him. I want to tell you it didn’t mean anything, but...”

“Hey,” Killian said as he grabbed my hand. “Look at me.”

I shook my head. I was too humiliated. Killian and I had finally really talked that very morning and we’d made love afterwards, and then I’d gone and fucked everything up by forgetting myself with Liam less than an hour later. I really *had* only meant to comfort the younger man, but somehow my mouth had landed on his instead of his cheek like I’d intended. I’d wanted to tell Killian right away, but Noah had been with him when Liam and I had left to go shopping, so I hadn’t had the chance. Then we’d had a late lunch and Killian had asked me to go with him to an AA meeting and then to have coffee with his sponsor, Delia. Guilt and fear had been eating me alive the entire time.

“Look at me,” Killian ordered firmly.

I did. The second I turned my head his mouth was on mine. I whimpered under the onslaught, then I was practically trying to crawl across the armrest between us to get to him.

“I trust you, Zak,” he breathed against my mouth. “If I’d had the opportunity to taste one of them again, I probably would have taken it too,” he admitted.

“That doesn’t make it right, Killian. I shouldn’t have—”

“Remember what I said about knowing you don’t love me any less?” he cut in.

I closed my eyes and nodded.

“You’re not the only one who’s feeling things that he thinks he shouldn’t.”

Killian’s admission surprised me... and comforted me a little.

“We need to talk to them,” I said.

“Yeah,” Killian agreed. “We’ll do it tonight after dinner.”

“Killian, there’s something else I want to say to you before we go in there. We didn’t get a chance to talk about it this morning.”

“Okay,” Killian said as he released his hold on me so I could settle back in my seat. I stayed so I was facing him.

“After you got shot, I was so scared, Killian. So fucking scared. I couldn’t get the image of seeing you flatlining out of my head and I...”

I let my words fall off because even now, the memory of Killian’s lifeless body beneath my hands as I’d performed CPR was making me feel sick. My colleagues had tried to pull me from the room when they’d realized Killian was my partner, but I’d shoved them all away and I’d ignored every single person who’d told me it was against policy for a staff member to treat a loved one. They’d finally given up when not even the chief of the ER had been able to get me to step away from my lover’s body. We’d worked on Killian for ten minutes before we’d gotten him back, and I’d nearly passed out then and there from the sheer relief.

“I know, baby,” Killian whispered as he took my hand in his and pulled it up to his lips.

“I thought the answer to not losing you was to make sure you were never in that kind of dangerous situation again. It was so fucking selfish—”

“No, it wasn’t,” Killian responded. “If I thought I could get away with wrapping you in bubble wrap and just keeping you all to myself so you never even feel an ounce of pain ever again, I’d do it.”

“You wouldn’t have asked me to give up my dream.”

“Zak—”

“Don’t try to excuse what I did, Killian. I knew how important your job was to you, even with everything that happened to Ryder. I should have focused on getting you through that, and not my own selfish needs.”

“Zak, I swear to God, if you call yourself selfish one more fucking time...”

He sounded truly angry.

Good.

“This is what I need, Killian,” I cut in. “I need you to get angry with me when I fuck up. I need you to not walk on eggshells around me.”

“I don’t—”

“You do,” I said. “I made the decision to bring Noah and Liam home without talking to you about it. I knew you’d say yes, but that doesn’t mean I should have done it.” I pulled in a breath and added, “And I need to not be afraid to confront you. Our relationship somehow became this thing where we stopped talking because we were so afraid of how we’d hurt each other in the past. I’ve been so consumed with guilt about making you give up being a cop that I felt like I didn’t have the right to ask you about things... I didn’t have the right to push. It’s like we’ve been walking this tightrope and we’re too afraid to move or breathe for fear of shaking ourselves or the other off it.”

“You’re right,” Killian said. “I’ve been trying to deal with things by myself because I was afraid of disappointing you.”

“Killian, you don’t belong in some dead-end construction job. We can go back to the city—”

He gently slapped a hand over my mouth. “Nope, my turn to talk,” he said.

I nodded and kissed his palm. He pulled his hand back, but not before tracing my lips with his thumb. I kissed it too.

“I had one dream until I met you, Zak. And I was living it. But the second I made you mine in that shitty little bathroom stall, my dream changed. *You* became my dream. It didn’t matter what kind of life we had together... as long as you were in it, that was all I needed. That’s all I’ll ever need. I love our life here. I love our house and the little family we’ve created. I love knowing that someday we’ll have some more two-legged family members because I still want that.”

My heart nearly exploded in my chest. Killian and I had talked about having children together for a long time, but when our lives had fallen apart, those conversations had too.

“You still want kids?” I breathed.

“So fucking much,” Killian admitted. “I want ones who have your gorgeous eyes and kind heart and I want just as many who don’t share an ounce of our DNA but who need us. I want us to be the family you never

had when you were little. No kid's ever going to walk through our door and wonder how long they're staying before they're sent away again. No one's going to be second choice in our house. Do you hear me?"

I nodded even as I tried to fight back the tears filling my eyes.

"I hear you, Killian," I managed to get out, then I was in his arms again. He kissed my neck and cheek as he held me. When I'd calmed down, he got out of the car and then went to my side to open the door for me. I took his hand and followed him into the house. Admittedly, I was more than eager to see Liam and Noah.

Liam had been a wreck at the clinic as I'd drawn his blood, but he'd calmed considerably when I'd taken him shopping. He hadn't liked when I'd insisted on buying him and Noah a few outfits and shoes and some other necessities, but when I'd started throwing stuff into the cart, he'd given in and helped me select things he thought Noah would like. We'd then grabbed another cartful of groceries as Liam had asked me what kinds of things Killian and I liked to eat. He'd laughed when I'd told him I figured Killian would eat anything, since he'd been eating my cooking for so long... and pretending he loved it.

By the time Liam and I had gotten home, Killian and Noah had been printing something on the 3-D printer and talking excitedly about it.

Well, *Killian* had been talking about it. Noah had been animatedly using his hands as he'd pointed at a surprisingly quiet and patient Waldo's beak and then the sketchpad. The plans to make dinner with Liam had changed when Killian had asked me to attend an AA meeting with him. While I hadn't been allowed to actually sit in on the meeting, just having him ask me to go with him had been a huge step forward. Afterwards, we'd gotten coffee with Delia and she'd given us an update on the psychologist she'd thought would be a good fit for Killian. On the way home, Killian and I had discussed the possibility of seeing if the doctor had any thoughts on Noah's condition too. We knew we were presuming a lot by even considering that it was something Noah and Liam would be interested in, or that they'd even be sticking around that long, but it was one of the few concrete ideas we had for trying to help Noah. We'd already decided that we'd need to figure out a schedule where one of us could stay up each night to make sure Noah didn't get out of the house again while Liam was asleep.

As Killian opened the front door, we both stood there waiting for the onslaught of dogs, cats, and birds to come greet us, but there was nothing

but the sound of music blasting throughout the house.

“What the hell?” Killian said in surprise. I followed him to the kitchen and nearly bumped into him when he came to a sudden stop in front of me. I stepped around him so I could see what he was seeing and smiled at the sight before us.

Noah and Liam were slow dancing in the space between the stove and the island. Both men were looking down at their feet and I could see Liam saying something as Noah appeared to concentrate. Waldo was perched on Noah’s shoulder.

It took me a few seconds to realize Liam was teaching Noah how to dance.

Liam nodded his head, then said something to Noah that had the younger man twirling slowly around. He was mindful of Waldo on his shoulder. Both Liam and Noah grinned when Noah finished the twirl. Several of our dogs were circling excitedly around the pair and Nana was eating what looked like a pile of carrot tops off the floor by the refrigerator.

I felt Killian’s fingers seek out mine as we watched the little group interact, completely oblivious to our presence. It wasn’t until Waldo began squawking and flapping his wings that Liam and Noah looked our way.

“Oh shit,” Liam said, then he darted to where we had an old iPod hooked up to a little radio. I laughed as he tried unsuccessfully to turn the music down. Noah hurried to his side and began fumbling with it, but between them, they only managed to change the source of the music to the radio itself. Marvin Gaye’s “Let’s Get it On” filled the air. The song was at the chorus with Marvin urging his baby to get it on. Noah and Liam looked horrified as they turned and quickly began trying to silence the music again. Noah finally yanked the cord from the wall. Waldo nearly fell off his shoulder in the process, but Liam managed to steady the toucan and was rewarded with an irritated peck that had him shaking his hand.

“Oh, hi, you’re... you’re home,” Liam said. “Noah and I were just cooking... food. Cooking food. For dinner.”

The pair looked so flustered that Killian and I broke out laughing. “Are you sure that’s all you were doing?” Killian asked. He looked at me and started singing “Let’s Get it On.” I joined in. We were mid-chorus when we got nailed with a few pieces of carrot, then some type of green leafy vegetable. More food flew as Killian and I took cover behind the island.

Killian managed to snag a handful of something from the top of the island that looked like cauliflower.

“Oh yeah, it’s on,” he said. “Cover me, baby, I’m going in!”

By the time it was all over, there was food everywhere, Killian, Noah, and Liam were laughing so hard they were crying, Waldo looked particularly peeved as he picked at all the vegetables stuck to his body, Nana and the rest of the animals were snagging whatever tasty treats they could get to on the floor, and I couldn’t stop taking in the enormous mess and thinking just one thing.

Yes, more, please.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

KILLIAN

“So, uh, Zak and I wanted to talk to you guys about last night... and this morning,” I began.

The easy smiles that Noah and Liam had been sporting most of the night faded and I could see them casting each other glances as they both blushed.

After the impromptu food fight, we’d worked together to clean up the mess we’d made and then Zak and I had set the table while Noah had helped Liam finish cooking. Zak and I had sat and watched the pair from the kitchen table as they’d worked. They’d traded lots of little kisses and touches between them... lots of looks too.

But that wasn’t all.

They’d sent a lot of looks our way too.

Longing ones.

And I’d felt each one deep in my chest.

In addition to the interactions between the two of them, every once in a while, Liam had come over to the kitchen table to let Zak and me try something from one of the wooden spoons he was using to cook with. He’d excitedly answered Zak’s questions about what spices were in the food he was preparing.

I’d watched the entire scene with a newfound sense of understanding. No, I didn’t know *why* what was happening between us was happening, but I knew what the outcome would be.

So while my original intention had been for the four of us to have an open conversation about everything that had happened between us over the past twenty-four hours, I knew I needed to change course if I had any hope

of protecting not only Zak's feelings, but mine as well. I wasn't upset about him kissing Liam or his honesty about it meaning something... I'd been just as tempted to do the same with Noah while we'd been holed up in my office.

And it sure as shit would have meant something.

Which was the crux of the problem.

This morning after I'd fucked Zak in the woods, I'd briefly thought maybe the four of us could just have a little fun with each other. I'd intended to see what Liam and Noah thought about the idea and then lay down some ground rules... all very neat and tidy and easy.

But there was nothing tidy or easy about the way Noah and Liam were fitting into our lives. The fact that I'd had to remind myself several times that they were just here until they got back on their feet was proof enough that Zak and I were way too deep into this thing. And it wasn't fair to put that on a young couple who were just trying to figure out their life together.

"First off, Zak and I want to be really clear that you are both free to stay with us as long as you need to get back on your feet. We can help you find work and a place to stay and if you want to finish school, we can help you figure that out too... we have some savings." I looked at Zak and he nodded approvingly. But I could also see the disappointment in his eyes.

He knew where I was going with this.

I turned my attention back to Noah and Liam who'd both gotten very, very quiet. And did they... did they look... *hurt*?

"Um, thank you," Liam murmured as he reached for Noah's hand. "We appreciate that. The staying here and finding work part," he added. His eyes shifted to Noah who was staring at the tabletop. "Maybe if you could help me figure out how to get a copy of my social security card or something, we can, uh, get out of your hair sooner."

Tension coursed through me at the response. Liam was saying the right things, but they were both so...

Distant.

The warmth and lightness that had been in the room all night was gone just like that.

"Sure," I said awkwardly. "We can help you do that."

Liam nodded.

Noah didn't react in any way other than to keep staring at the blank notepad in front of him.

“So, um, yeah, about last night and this morning... Zak and I wanted to make sure you guys were okay with what happened but thought it would be best if we, uh... if it doesn’t happen... again.”

When I didn’t receive any kind of response, I barreled on. “It’s just that, when something like that happens, feelings can get confusing and you guys already have so much on your plate and we just think that maybe we shouldn’t... complicate things.”

Even as I said the words, I wanted to call them back. Liam and Noah just stared at the kitchen table like the scarred wood was the most fascinating thing they’d ever seen. Zak was fidgeting next to me. I reached for his hand beneath the table.

Liam cleared his throat. “Yeah, you’re right. This morning was... *fun*.”

He sounded like he was going to strangle himself on the word. “But it *would* be complicated. We don’t... we don’t want to cause any more trouble than we already have.”

“That’s not what I said—” I began to say, but Liam cut me off.

“Maybe, um, if you could loan us a couple hundred bucks, we can find a place to stay and I can get a job... if I tell places that are hiring that I’m getting a new ID, maybe they’ll let me start before it comes.”

“No,” Zak said. “No, that isn’t what—”

Before he could finish, Noah was off his chair. I saw him wipe at his face. Liam didn’t try and stop him as he left the table.

I grabbed the younger man’s arm. “Noah, wait, are you upset? Zak and I are just trying to do the right thing here.”

Noah ripped his arm from my grasp.

He looked so fucking hurt.

Tears were streaming down his face, but his mouth was tight with anger. He hurried back to the table and grabbed the notepad and pen off it. He scratched something onto the top page, ripped it off and practically stomped back to me. He slammed the page against my chest. It didn’t hurt, of course, because he was just too small to put any real strength behind the move, but the action still had me speechless.

As I read the note, Noah rushed toward the back door.

Sorry we’re such a COMPLICATION.

“No,” I said as I looked at Liam. “No, *you guys* aren’t...”

The back door slammed closed. I hurried after Noah because Liam didn’t move.

It was dark outside but the floodlights on the house lit up most of the back yard. I caught up to Noah at the bottom of the porch stairs. He was clearly headed toward the barn. We'd put Nana out there so she could eat her hay.

"Noah, wait," I said as I grabbed his arm.

He yanked it free and then he shoved at my chest hard.

"I didn't mean you and Liam were a complication! I meant the whole thing would be complicated."

My words seemed to have no effect on him whatsoever. I looked back at the house and saw Zak and Liam were standing by the door watching us. But while they were physically standing next to one another, they might as well have been on opposite ends of the Grand Canyon. There were no warm looks or smiles, there was no gravitational pull between their bodies. They wouldn't even look at one another.

I'd done that.

I replayed my own words in my head and realized how they must have sounded. I'd been trying to protect Zak's and my emotions, but I'd stomped all over Noah's and Liam's to do it by implying that what had happened between us this morning, the night before, hadn't been more than us messing around. And worse, the way I'd phrased the whole thing had made it sound like Noah and Liam were the ones who'd get their feelings hurt.

I remembered the way Noah had looked at me right before I'd kissed him this morning. So full of trust.

And something else, too.

I'd shit on that.

I'd shit on every moment that had happened since then.

"Noah, please, just give me a second to explain," I said as I caught up to him again and grabbed his arm. This time, I didn't release him when he struggled against me. He was still crying, and I could hear the distressed whimpers building in his throat. I could see him trying to form words as he fought my hold, but whatever he wanted to say to me wouldn't come. But from the fight he was putting up, I was pretty sure he just wanted me to leave him alone.

"I didn't mean things the way they sounded," I began, but Noah ignored me and grabbed the note he'd written out of my hand and slammed it against my chest again, this time with more force. I let the paper fall to the ground as Noah fought to escape me.

“No,” I snapped, then I dragged him forward and covered his mouth with mine. He gasped in surprise, and I used it to my advantage. I plunged my tongue into his mouth and sought out his. Noah struggled in my hold for a few more seconds, then let out a little sob and put his arms around my neck. His tongue tangled with mine. I threaded my fingers through his hair so I could hold him still for my onslaught. His sweetness flowed over my tongue like the coolest, clearest water. His body was flush with mine as I kept up the kisses until he was completely boneless in my hold. I could feel his tears clinging to my own skin and I wanted to kick my own ass for hurting him as badly as I had.

I tore my mouth from his and growled, “You’re not a fucking complication, do you hear me?”

I didn’t give him time to answer. Instead, I kissed him again and made sure he heard me that way. I knew I needed to go slower because Noah clearly wasn’t experienced, but now that I’d given myself permission to feel instead of think, my heart was overruling my head. And my body was definitely listening to my heart.

I slid my hands over Noah’s sweet ass and then gripped his cheeks. I lifted him, releasing his mouth just long enough to order, “Put your legs around my waist.”

He did.

Without hesitation.

His arms were still around my neck, and the way I was holding him had his mouth higher than mine. He attacked my lips as I walked us both back to the house. I somehow managed to get up the porch steps without falling on my ass. I forced myself to tear my mouth from Noah’s when we reached Liam and Zak. I was pleased to see they were holding hands now. I set Noah on his feet and backed him up until he was pressed against Zak’s body. I kept the smaller man between us as I looked at Liam. I needed to make sure he was absolutely one hundred percent on board with this.

He was breathing hard as he watched me. I knew because I could see the little puffs of freezing air popping up between us. His eyes dropped to my mouth for the briefest of seconds before he lifted them again. I was already crazy with need just from kissing Noah, but seeing that same emotion in Liam’s eyes had me stepping into his body. I kept my free hand on Noah’s waist as I pushed Liam back against the doorjamb and settled my mouth over his. I swore I heard him whisper my name right before I kissed

him. His mouth was supple and soft as our lips and tongues melded. His hands came up to cup my head as he took over the kiss. Whereas Noah wasn't as confident when it came to kissing, Liam had no such reservations. He took what he wanted, and I was happy to give it to him. We were both breathless by the time we separated.

"Be sure, Liam," was all I said.

He nodded without hesitation. The lightness was back in his eyes. I gave him a little tug so that he was pressed against Noah's body. Noah and Zak were mid-kiss. Their kiss was different than mine and Liam's... it was soft and seeking and less rushed. They were savoring one another. I settled my lips on the back of Noah's neck and only sought out Zak's mouth when he released Noah's lips to find mine. I lost track of who was kissing who after that. At one point, we somehow managed to meld all our mouths together as one. We could have been there for minutes or hours, but when our touches and kisses grew more desperate, I searched out Zak's mouth for a quick kiss and said, "Let's go upstairs."

Zak nodded and reached behind him to open the door. Noah and Liam seemed to hesitate a moment, but I knew why, and it had nothing to do with having second thoughts. At least not on their part. If anything, they were thinking that Zak and I might be the ones having second thoughts.

I kissed each man just as softly as I'd kissed Zak. "Our bed's bigger, but we don't care where we end up or what we do tonight... as long as we're with you. *Both* of you."

Liam and Noah exchanged a brief look, then Noah was stepping into the house and taking Zak's hand in his. Liam kissed me. "Your room," he whispered. His fingers closed around mine as he led me into the house.

As I locked the door behind me and followed *my* men – yes, because that's what they were tonight... *my* men – all I could think was *fuck complicated*.

Complicated was just going to have to take the night off.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

LIAM

“Oh fuck, wait,” I said just as our little group reached the stairs leading to the second floor. Noah and Zak hadn’t been able to stop kissing for more than a few seconds at a time, but when I spoke, all eyes were on me.

Shit, why hadn’t I just discreetly slipped away from the group?

Humiliation flooded my cheeks.

“What is it, baby?” Killian asked with concern. The endearment made my heart pound erratically in my chest... okay, *more* erratically.

“Um, nothing, I forgot something. I’ll... I’ll be right back. You, uh, start without me.”

I tried to tug my hand free of Killian’s, but he refused to release me. “Are you having second thoughts?” Killian asked worriedly.

Was he fucking kidding me? I was so hard I probably could have pounded railroad spikes at that point. “No, I, uh, I need to get something from, um... fuck,” I whispered in humiliation. How had I managed to ruin this entire moment? I looked at Noah who was watching me with concern.

“Zak took me to get tested today. If you and I want to do anything,” – I looked at the other two men too – “if *any* of you want to do anything with me, we need to use condoms. Zak said you guys didn’t have any condoms, so he bought me some today and they’re in Noah’s and my room. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t ever be sorry for putting your partner’s safety first,” Killian murmured. Then he kissed me sweetly. “*All* your partners.” His big fingers skimmed my cheek and then his mouth was closing over mine in a bone-

melting kiss. “Do you want me to go get them?” he asked when he separated our mouths by just the tiniest bit.

“Get what?” I asked stupidly, then I was leaning into him and kissing him again. I felt obscenely proud when he groaned. I could feel his erection through his jeans.

“Condoms, Liam,” Killian nearly snarled. “Get the fucking condoms.”

“Oh, right,” I said. I started to turn away when Noah reached out to snag my hand. Reality slammed into me hard. “Oh, God, Noah, I’m sorry. We didn’t talk about this yet. I meant to, but I figured we should wait a while. I mean, I want to make love to you like crazy, but I can wait for as long as you want. Or if you don’t want to at all—”

Noah kissed me hard.

Really hard.

His kiss was as demanding as Killian’s.

I shivered at how good it felt. I felt him press something in my hand. When he released my mouth, he stepped back. My eyes nearly popped out of my head when I saw a strip of condoms sitting neatly in my palm. They were the same brand I’d gotten at the store.

“Have you been carrying these around all afternoon?” I asked.

Noah shrugged his shoulders.

“Is that why you asked me to teach you to dance?”

Noah reached for Killian’s hand. He turned it over so the palm was facing down. Then he pointed at me.

“Me,” I acknowledged.

He grabbed my free hand and used my fingers to spell out letters on the back of Killian’s hand.

“T. O. O. S. L. O. W.”

Killian chuckled as I came to the last letter.

“I’m too slow,” I said with a nod, then I made a grab for Noah. He laughed and rushed to hide behind Zak. He took Zak’s hand and started leading him up the stairs, then he wagged his finger at me to follow.

“He’s always going to keep you on your toes,” Killian said as he kissed the back of my neck and wrapped an arm around my waist.

Zak and Noah were already at the top of the stairs, so I kept my voice low as I turned to face Killian. “I don’t think he’s been with a guy before,” I admitted. “I’m nervous... I’ve never been with someone who hasn’t...”

Heat suffused my body. “I mean, I don’t really know what we’re going to do up there, but maybe you and Zak should—”

“The second we start overthinking this is the moment it stops being about just enjoying each other tonight.” Killian caressed the back of my neck as he brushed his nose against mine. “Just trust what’s in your heart, Liam. Noah loves you. He trusts you. No one can hear him better than you can. Don’t forget that, okay?”

I pulled in a breath and nodded.

“I’m scared,” I admitted. I didn’t tell him what I was scared of because I knew in my gut that he already had an idea of it himself. We were treading into uncharted territory. We weren’t just four guys hopping into bed for a little fun for one night. That, in itself, made it exactly what Killian had said... complicated.

“Me too,” Killian whispered. “You can both stop this at any time, okay?”

I nodded. “You and Zak too.”

“Agreed,” Killian said, then he kissed me. “Now let’s get up there before our guys start without us, okay?”

He made a move to step past me, but I held him just a bit longer. “Let’s give them a minute... might make for a more interesting sight to walk in on,” I suggested.

Killian’s pupils went dark as he backed me up several steps until my back hit the wall. “I like the way you think,” he growled, then he kissed me long and deep. His hand began rubbing my dick through my pants. I was squirming by the time he drew his mouth back. He kept teasing me through my jeans. “Is this okay?” he asked as he planted his hand on the wall next to my head.

“Really, really okay,” I murmured with a nod. “Can you... can you make me come... before we get up there?” I asked. “I... I need to go slow for Noah, but I don’t think I can.” It was a humiliating thing to have to admit to, but I was drawn so tight that I knew I’d explode the second I got inside of Noah, if that was where things ended up leading. And I absolutely couldn’t risk hurting him in any kind of way.

Not to mention, I really just wanted Killian’s hands on me.

And his mouth.

It’d been a long time since a man who was larger and stronger than me had brought me pleasure. In fact, it’d never happened, not counting our

encounter in bed earlier, and part of me was afraid I'd freak out in front of Noah and Zak.

But I didn't tell Killian that part.

Killian pressed the length of his body against mine and began sipping at my lips with teasing kisses and little licks. "Tell me what you want, Liam," he murmured. "My hand on your cock?" Killian's fingers undid the button on my jeans. "Or my mouth?"

I could barely breathe as he slipped his tongue into my mouth and sucked hard on mine. I'd blow a gasket the second he put his sinful mouth on my dick.

I was about to nod my head when he suddenly spun me around and pressed me into the wall with his big body. His lips closed over my pulse point as his hand slid along my crack. The jeans prevented him from doing anything but applying pressure, but when his finger pushed against my hole, I groaned.

"Or do you want my mouth here?" he asked.

I let out a whimper as I realized what he meant. None of the guys who'd fucked me had ever done that to me. Certainly not the guys who'd bought and paid for me and not the few men I'd been with in college. The idea was terrifying and fascinating at the same time.

"Do you need a sample of each before you make your decision, baby?" Killian asked.

His hand shifted to my front so he could rub my cock again.

I was sweating and shaking. So much for having Killian get me off hard and fast.

"Yes... yes, Killian, please, anything."

"You still have those condoms in your hand, sweetheart?"

I nodded clumsily. I'd crushed the little packets in my palm at some point. Killian took them all from me, then he eased me around. "Take deep breaths, Liam. Just feel."

I sucked in air and tried to count backward from ten like I'd always told Noah to do, but the second Killian pushed my jeans and underwear down to expose my painfully hard dick, I began to sob in relief.

Killian's fingers closed around my dick and began gently pumping me. I could hear the foil tearing, but all I could really focus on was the sensation of Killian's calloused fingers moving over my sensitive skin. I pressed my hands against my eyes as I tried to control my reaction. I'd wanted to get off

so I could go more slowly with Noah, but now all I wanted to do was prolong what was happening to me.

“That’s it, Liam, just enjoy it,” Killian praised. “Hold on a little longer... want to get my tongue in that sweet ass of yours.”

I let out a ragged moan. I was never going to make it. But the idea of Killian’s hot tongue touching me there...

“Oh God, Killian,” I whispered when I felt the condom being rolled down my dick. The snug fit was torture. “It hurts,” I admitted. And it did. But not in an entirely bad way.

“I know, baby. I’m going to make it better.” With that, Killian dropped to his knees and swallowed my dick down in one swift, well-versed move. I shouted in surprise and then slammed my hips forward. Killian’s fingers closed around the base of my cock as he began sucking on me hard. I looked down just as he looked up. The sight of the gorgeous man watching me as he slowly released my base and swallowed my length until his nose was pressed into the wiry hair at my groin was heaven and hell. He slid back off me, then took me in deep again. My hips took over as I fisted my hands in his hair. He let me fuck his mouth with abandon. He never took his eyes off mine. My balls drew up tight, but just before I was about to blow, Killian released my dick with a wet, popping sound.

“Killian, no,” I cried, but then his mouth was on mine.

“Need to taste you,” he growled against me, then he turned me so I was facing the wall. I felt the condom being tugged off my dick, then two big hands closed around my hips and dragged me backward.

“Put your hands flat against the wall,” Killian demanded. I didn’t have time to be scared or nervous, because his palms slid down my ass and split me open. I’d just braced myself against the wall when the flat of his tongue licked over my opening. I jolted and let out a choking sound, but before I could even process how good it had felt, it was happening again.

And again.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I ground out as I pressed my forehead against the wall. I opened my eyes to see my own cock bobbing furiously against my belly. Pre-cum was dripping from the head. My flesh was an angry reddish-purple color.

Killian’s licks became more demanding and I could feel my asshole relaxing under his attention.

I was empty.

Too fucking empty.

In every way possible.

“Killian,” I begged unashamedly as sobs of need began to rack my body.

Killian kissed my hole gently, like he was kissing my lips, then his tongue began to push harder against me. His hands held my hips in place as his mouth became more demanding. I couldn't stop the sounds that were spewing out of my throat as he ate at my ass over and over until he was kissing me there just like he'd kissed my mouth so many times tonight. My knees buckled and I sank to the floor. Killian shifted me so my upper body was resting on the first few steps. He sucked, licked, and tongued my ass over and over until it felt like every nerve in my body was linked to him. When his hand reached between my legs and began jacking me off, I called his name. Between his tongue inside of me and his skilled fingers pumping my dick, I came within a few seconds. The orgasm hit me like a freight train, and I was actually afraid of the pummeling my body was taking as wave after wave of pleasure washed over me. My skin felt like bombs of sensation were detonating beneath it. Fire raced through my veins as my balls emptied right there on the pretty wooden steps. I barely heard Killian's slurps as he continued to play with my ass. By the time the climax released me from its delicious grip, Killian was pressed along my back, whispering words of praise in my ear and kissing the back of my neck.

“You're so beautiful, Liam,” Killian murmured. “So strong.”

I didn't feel strong at the moment. Nowhere near.

In fact, I'd never felt more vulnerable in my life. My emotions were all over the place. I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. I never wanted to move from that spot, but I also wanted to get to Noah and Zak and just be with them the way I had with Killian.

“Killian?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“I'm sorry.”

“For what?” he asked as he kissed my cheek.

“For not really getting it. For not understanding what you were trying to tell us tonight.” I managed a little nod. “Complicated,” I whispered.

Killian nuzzled my hair, then gently kissed the spot where Zak had patched me up the night before. “Do you hear that, Liam?” he asked.

“What?”

“Just listen,” Killian urged. He kept up the butterfly kisses.

I finally heard it.

Moaning.

Coming from upstairs.

Two distinct moans.

My sated cock stirred a little.

“That’s the sound of our men loving on one another. I say we go join them and fuck complicated for tonight, okay?”

I nodded. I wasn’t sure I’d ever heard a better plan than that one.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

NOAH

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” Zak asked as he caressed my cheek with his finger. We were lying in the middle of his and Killian’s bed, facing one another, as we listened to the muted cries coming from downstairs.

We’d been kissing for most of the time, but once we’d started hearing Liam calling out to Killian, we’d stopped. Zak and I were lying flush against one another, so I could feel that, like me, he was still hard. Which meant, like me, the sounds from downstairs were turning him on.

I nodded. I closed my eyes and tried to picture the word I wanted to say. I made myself ignore my father’s voice as he warned me to not make a sound.

“Per-fect,” I managed to squeeze out as the darkness tried to suck me under.

“Stay with me, Noah,” Zak urged.

I focused on his voice as well as the sounds Liam was making. On the one hand, I really, really wanted to see what Killian was doing to him, but on the other, I wanted Liam to have that moment where he was being completely taken care of. Killian was giving Liam something I didn’t know how to... yet. But I’d learn. This was one place where I wouldn’t come up short when it came to giving Liam what he’d given me. Or Zak or Killian, either.

I’d been so fucking hurt when Killian had dismissed what had happened this morning between us. Logically, I’d known that was the “normal” thing to do, because surely two men who’d been together for seven years couldn’t have felt something for two virtual strangers they’d only helped out of pity.

But logic and my heart weren't seeing eye to eye, and my anger with Killian and Zak had come from my heart. The fact was that the things I felt for Killian and Zak were running as strong and as deep as they did for Liam. I might not have been a hundred percent there yet, but I knew it was only a matter of time. Tonight had proven that. Yes, I loved their house and their animals and how they were with each other, but that wasn't the reason I wanted to be with them. That wasn't the reason my heart skipped a beat whenever one of them walked into a room. My feelings weren't out of some false sense of gratitude, though I most definitely was grateful.

No, it was all a lot simpler than that... and *not*.

The bottom line was that I was falling in love with both men.

Just like I was in love with Liam.

"Open your eyes, beautiful," Zak urged.

I did as he said and was rewarded with one of his heart-stopping smiles. I loved when Zak smiled. I loved watching him interact with all the animals and talk to them like they were real people. I loved how he let Liam just be Liam. And I loved how he loved Killian.

I pulled Zak down to kiss me. He didn't hold back as he leaned over me. His kiss was a lot different from Killian's. It was no less demanding, but in a different way. And it was equally as intoxicating as Liam and Killian's kisses.

Zak pressed me flat on the bed as he took his time kissing me. His hand roamed up and down my side. "You're so beautiful, Noah," he whispered against my mouth. "Inside and out. And so fucking brave."

I shook my head to deny that, but Zak cupped my chin. "None of us had the courage to say what you did tonight, Noah. We all want this, but you were the only one who was willing to do something about it. Even if you never say another word, don't ever doubt how much your voice counts. And the way you fought to stay with Liam that day in the hospital... I know you think you don't protect Liam enough, but you're just as strong as he is. You guys made it out there for so long because you had each other... because you watched out for each other. Strength comes from in here." Zak placed his hand over my heart. "You've got the heart of a warrior, my sweet Noah. Don't ever doubt that."

I felt tears stinging the backs of my eyes as I took in the expression on his face.

I pulled him down for another kiss.

I knew then that he understood better than anyone that what was happening between us all was real, even if it shouldn't be.

The sounds coming from downstairs began to ratchet up our passion. When Zak pushed my shirt up, I worked it off my body because I knew he wouldn't. I knew that I was the most inexperienced of the group and all the men were likely to use kid gloves with me. If I wanted it to be any different, I'd just have to make that really clear. And since I couldn't tell the guys that, I'd have to find more creative means of getting my point across.

Zak's hand skimmed my chest. When his fingers sought out one of my nipples, I nearly jumped out of my skin. Liam and I hadn't had a chance to mess around after what had happened this morning, so I was still learning about my body's own responses to different kinds of touches. Admittedly, I was nervous about the idea of making love for the first time, but nothing about it happening with three men instead of one scared me.

Because it was Zak and Killian and Liam.

Nothing about being with them, together or apart, felt wrong.

Zak was watching me intently as he rubbed my nipple. He applied different levels of pressure so by the time he dropped his mouth to my chest, I was squirming against him. I grabbed his head when he began licking my nipple. He teased and tormented it for several long seconds before he took it into his mouth and sucked on it. I cried out in pleasure as sensation ripped through my body. I gripped his back for support as he moved to the other nipple.

"Zak," I managed to cry out without even realizing it until Zak stopped suddenly and looked at me in surprise. He smiled like I'd just given him the best present ever, then his mouth was on mine. His kiss was much more demanding this time around. He grabbed both my hands in his and pinned them to the bed as he shifted his weight over me. His mouth sought out my nipple again, and this time there was no teasing. He went in for the kill and when I said his name again, he just heightened the intensity.

My dick throbbed painfully in my pants, especially when Zak began trailing his mouth down my belly. He was forced to let go of my hands, but I ended up leaving them where they were so I could focus on every single caress of his mouth and tongue. He took his time working my pants open. "Lift up, beautiful," he urged.

I did as he said and watched him through heavily lidded eyes. He pressed kisses all around my groin but ignored my cock. He made his way

down my legs as he got my pants and underwear completely off. As he moved up my body again, I heard Liam moaning downstairs.

“Do you want to know what I think Killian is doing to him right now?” Zak asked as he placed gentle kisses along the inside of my thigh. His cheek pressed against my shaft. I nodded quickly.

“Killian likes giving head,” Zak said. “So I’m thinking he’s got a mouthful of Liam’s gorgeous cock right now.”

I jumped when Zak kissed the head of my dick as he moved his mouth to my other thigh. I was quaking with need. But I wasn’t sure which I wanted more at the moment... his mouth on my dick or his description of what Killian was doing to Liam.

Who was I kidding?

I wanted both equally.

“Killian likes to be really direct,” Zak murmured. “Whereas, I...” – Zak let his tongue travel from my thigh over the shaft of my cock – “like to be more subtle.” I practically bowed off the bed when his tongue slid down my dick to my balls. He used his nose to nuzzle my cock aside.

“Killian’s gag reflex is pretty much nonexistent, so he’s got that on me as well,” Zak remarked. His eyes met mine from where he was now kneeling on the floor. His hands moved to my hips. “So I’ve had to compensate in other ways,” he said easily, then he took one of my balls into his mouth.

“Ghhh!” I cried because I was incapable of forming words for a whole other reason now. Zak slurped and sucked at my balls as he alternated taking them into his mouth. At one point, I was sure he had them both in there. By the time he licked my dick again, I was shaking and sweating.

“Mmmm, sweet,” Zak said as he flicked his tongue over the head of my cock. I jumped every time he did it. I began fisting the blanket as he took more of me into his mouth. I’d never felt anything so hot or wet or tight before. I covered his head with my hand so I could try to keep him there, but Zak had other plans.

His hands were still on my hips, so as soon as he released my dick, he pulled me toward the edge of the bed so my legs were hanging over it. Zak placed my legs over his shoulders as he continued to tease my dick with his mouth but didn’t take me inside of him again.

“Zak,” I managed to say.

I saw him smile again, but he still didn't give in to what I obviously wanted.

"Now, Killian loves cock, don't get me wrong," Zak began, and it took me a moment to remember what we'd been talking about. The moans coming from downstairs reminded me. Zak started pushing my legs up. He moved slowly and with a little more hesitation, and I figured it was so I could stop him if I wanted to.

I didn't.

I had no clue what he was planning, but it would have taken a meteor obliterating Earth for me to even consider stopping the blissful torment. I reached down to run my hand along my cock because I was that desperate for relief.

Zak had my legs pushed up pretty high by the time I realized what he was doing. I'd only seen the act in a few really explicit videos I'd found online, but I hadn't ever imagined it was something a man would actually want to do to another in real life.

Or have done.

"But he's an ass man, through and through," Zak said softly, then he pressed his nose into my crease, and I felt something hot and wet touch my hole.

I cried out as I twisted away from Zak. He kept my legs in a gentle hold as he licked me again. This time, instead of trying to escape him, I found myself twisting back and lifting my ass to give him better access. My mind warred with my body at the idea of the forbidden act, but when he gently sucked on me, I told my mind to go fuck itself.

So Zak could fuck me with his tongue.

That was exactly what he did. I was writhing and moaning by the time he climbed on top of me. His shirt was gone, but his pants were still on. There was a certain tanginess to his flavor when he kissed me now, but it was just as intoxicating as before.

I didn't care what that made me.

I ran my hands up and down Zak's hot skin as he settled his weight on top of me. I curled my legs around his waist and began lifting my hips in hopes of finding relief. Zak's moans filtered through the air as he began humping me. His mouth sought out mine.

I knew we weren't alone anymore when the bed dipped next to me. When I reached out my hand, I knew it was Liam who grabbed it. I was

desperately clinging to Zak as he rubbed our bodies together, but when Liam's face appeared on the bed next to mine, I whispered his name.

"Noah," he responded. He looked more at ease than I'd ever seen him. He leaned in to kiss me, then he and Zak were kissing. I felt the fabric between Zak's body and mine disappear. I cried into Liam's mouth as I felt Zak's damp cock sliding against mine for the first time.

"Fuck, Killian!" Zak cried out as he suddenly went still against me. I wanted to protest, but then Liam's hand was between our bodies and he was gripping us both. Zak began slowly grinding against me. He pressed his sweaty forehead against my collarbone as moans spilled from deep within his throat.

It was tough, but I managed to get a glimpse of Killian kneeling on the floor behind Zak. I cradled Zak's head as Killian worked his ass and Liam pumped our dicks.

"I need to come," Zak cried out. "Please."

"Not yet, baby," Killian said, his voice low and deep. He leaned over Zak's back, which meant he was leaning over me too. But he kept his weight off us. He kissed a shaky Zak's neck. "I want to be inside you when you get to watch our beautiful boys come together for the first time, okay?"

Zak sucked in several lungfuls of air. Liam had removed his hand from between our bodies. I was feeling just as shaky as Zak but knowing it would be the four of us together when I finally did find my release made the coming down a bit easier.

"Do you want that, Noah?" Liam asked as Killian eased Zak off me and took him into his arms. Killian and Liam had both gotten undressed at some point, so we were all completely naked.

I nodded as I turned into Liam's body. We kissed over and over until I lost track of time. When Liam urged me to move to the middle of the bed so my head was on the pillows, I did. Killian's weight came down on me a moment later and I eagerly greeted him. His cock felt huge against mine and I both envied Zak and worried for him a bit.

"Hey, beautiful," Killian said with a sweet smile as he kissed me softly. His body felt big and hard against mine. I let one hand drift over his shoulder and down his back. His tattoos fascinated me. So did the little piercing in his nose. But when my fingers touched cold metal on his chest, I froze.

God, were his nipples pierced too?

“Got those for Zak,” Killian said with a grin. “Well, *because* of Zak,” he corrected, then mused, “The things that man can do with his mouth.” I smiled and nodded in agreement. I was sure I had to be blushing to the roots of my hair.

“The other piercing is a particular favorite of Zak’s.”

I looked at the one in his nose. It was nice, but I couldn’t see how that could be Zak’s—

“Not that one,” Killian said. Then he shifted against me and I jumped when I felt cold metal slide over my dick.

I must have made some kind of strange sound or looked as wide-eyed as I felt because Killian chuckled. He reached for my hand and put it between our bodies. Cool, smooth metal greeted my touch, along with hot, hard, velvety-soft skin.

“It’s called a Prince Albert piercing,” Killian said.

I wanted to ask if it hurt but realized that would have been the stupidest question on the planet, even if I’d been able to ask it. My next question would have been why in the world someone would do that to themselves.

But that only lasted as long as it took for me to run my finger over the piercing. Killian sucked in a breath and closed his eyes.

Question asked... and answered.

The piercing clearly made Killian’s already sensitive flesh a thousand times more responsive. I began experimenting with what reactions different amounts of pressure would cause. It didn’t take long for Killian to tug my hand away. He pressed it to his chest instead. “Too much, sweetheart,” he said. “You’ll make me blow before I get inside my man over there.”

I turned to look in the direction he was and saw Zak and Liam were kissing by the side of the bed. Zak was running his hand up and down Liam’s condom-covered cock.

“And that’s thanks to your man,” Killian added. “You should have seen him, Noah. So beautiful in his responses. Just like he was with you last night.”

I slid my hand over Killian’s chest, intent on checking out his nipple piercings with a whole new perspective, but came up short when I felt raised flesh. I followed it for an inch, then stopped. I felt the air catch in my lungs and I struggled to sit up.

“Noah, what is it? Are you all right?” Killian said as he moved back to give me room. He supported my arm as I righted myself.

“Noah?” Liam called worriedly. I looked over at him and Zak briefly, then turned my attention back to Killian and stared at the long scar running down the center of his chest. I clapped my hand over my mouth to stifle the sob that tried to escape.

“Noah, baby, didn’t Zak tell you I got shot a couple years ago?”

I nodded because Zak *had* told me that. He’d even said that Killian had had to have surgery to remove the bullet, but I hadn’t really understood what that had meant. And now that I was here and Killian was in front of me, the reality of how close we’d all come to not having him there hit home.

And I was kind of freaking out about it.

Which meant I was ruining the perfection of what was about to happen between us.

But try as I might, I couldn’t curb my reaction. I moved my hand up to my eyes in hopes that not seeing that scar would somehow change things, but it didn’t help. The second a hand touched my cheek, I was a goner.

It didn’t even matter whose hand it was because the truth was, in that moment, I needed all my men more than ever.

CHAPTER THIRTY

ZAK

“Zak,” Liam said softly as I searched out the lube. I’d already put the condom on him because his fingers had been shaking too bad to do the job himself. And it wasn’t exactly a hardship to touch his gorgeous cock. He wasn’t as thick as Killian, but he might have actually been a bit longer.

“Yeah?” I said. He’d been kissing and touching me as I’d been getting him ready, but when his hand stilled on my hip, I looked at him. A quick glance at Noah and Killian showed that they too were softly talking. In fact, Noah had his hands between their bodies. The thought of his slim fingers wrapped around Killian’s shaft got me even more worked up than I already was.

When I realized how panic-stricken Liam looked, I cupped his cheek. “Liam?”

He leaned sweetly into my touch. “I’m okay,” he reassured me. “I just...”

Was he having second thoughts? “Liam, if you don’t want to do this—”

“I do,” he cut in, then he leaned in and kissed me. “So much, Zak... you have no idea.”

I figured I kind of did, but I kept that point to myself. “Then what is it? You’re shaking,” I murmured as I slid my hands up and down his arms.

“I’m happy, Zak,” Liam said so softly I almost didn’t hear him.

“What?”

“I’m happy,” he repeated. He kept his voice low like he was somehow afraid of being overheard. Like it was a big secret.

I was about to admit I didn't understand what he meant until things clicked.

He wasn't talking about just being happy in this one moment... he meant it overall. And God if that didn't just fucking break my heart. He was happy, but he was also scared of it. What kind of loss and pain did a person have to experience to be so afraid of something so many people took for granted on a day-to-day basis?

But I realized I knew better than anyone what he was talking about. I'd gone through all the same things when I'd met Killian... when life had finally started to look up for me and I'd been within striking distance of my dreams.

"Me too, Liam," I said, because I knew he wasn't looking for some crappy words of wisdom about how he'd never lose the feeling if he didn't want to or whatever. God knew, Killian and I had lost our way for a while because of things that had happened... terrible things beyond our control. Liam just wanted someone who would get it... he wanted to see what it was like to share his joy.

He'd come to the right place.

Liam's tension eased but just as he leaned in to kiss me again, we heard Killian call Noah's name. We both turned to see Killian dip his head and ask Noah if I'd told the younger man about Killian getting shot.

Noah's hand was on the long scar that ran down the middle of Killian's chest... the spot where doctors had had to crack his chest open to restart his heart during the middle of the operation to remove the bullet from one of his lungs.

I *had* told Noah about the injury and the operation, but he'd clearly been unprepared to see the remnants of the day Killian had nearly lost his life.

I could see Noah struggling to keep his emotions in check, but I also knew it was a lost cause.

"Noah, sweetheart, please don't cry," Killian said as he put a hand on Noah's cheek. Liam and I were already moving across and around the bed when Noah let out one heart-wrenching sob after another. Killian drew him against his chest and Liam and I each took up a side so we could envelop the smaller man in warmth and reassurance.

"Noah, look at me," I said, because I knew exactly where Noah's head was at. When his watery eyes connected with mine, I took his hand and placed it back on the scar. He started to cry harder.

“Baby, feel what’s beneath the scar,” I said. Noah hiccupped as he tried to focus on something behind the ugly images that I knew were rattling through his head. “Feel how steady and strong his heart beats, Noah. He’s here and he’s okay and anytime you feel this scar, wait for the beat that follows.”

Noah did as I asked and stared at Killian’s chest. I was still holding my hand over Noah’s to make sure he didn’t move it. My eyes met Killian’s and I saw a newfound sense of understanding in them.

And an apology that I didn’t need.

“No more I’m sorrys,” I reminded him.

Killian blinked rapidly a few times, then nodded. We all sat there in silence as Noah calmed considerably. I released his hand, but he kept it on Killian’s chest for another minute or so. When he lowered it, Liam cuddled him against his own chest. “Let’s get some rest, okay?”

Noah shook his head and wiped at his eyes.

“Noah—”

“Sorr-y,” Noah croaked.

“You have nothing to be sorry—” Liam began, but Noah cut him off with a hard kiss. Liam seemed to try to resist him at first, but it was like trying to fight the tide. Killian used the opportunity to pull me forward.

“I love you,” he said fiercely in my ear.

“Love you,” I whispered back, then he was kissing me long and deep. I ended up beneath him, and the desire that had died upon witnessing Noah’s distress flared back to life. Killian’s mouth burned a path down my body, but he wasn’t alone. I was inundated with sensation as lips and fingers explored my mouth, my skin, my cock. I recognized Killian’s mouth when it closed around my dick and sucked, but the mouth that followed was new.

And a little more lacking in finesse.

Noah.

Which meant the tongue in my mouth was Liam’s.

I basked in warmth and pleasure as my men showered me with their touch. I was never alone, even as I heard foil tearing and the sound of the little pump on the lube bottle. As our men prepared themselves, Noah and I turned to each other and began kissing and stroking each other. The bed dipped multiple times. My cock was once again hard as a rock when Killian began pushing his lubed finger into my body a few moments later. Noah

was pressed flush against my front. He closed his mouth over my shoulder when Liam began preparing him.

“Bear down on him, baby,” I murmured against his ear. “It’ll feel really good soon, I promise.”

Noah nodded and did as I said. He let out a gasp when Liam moved behind him.

“So tight,” Liam said approvingly in Noah’s ear as he nuzzled him. Noah’s cock had gone soft as Liam started prepping him, but I could feel it filling again every time Liam spoke to him. Killian massaged my opening as he watched the two younger men, and I was glad because as ready as I was for him to fuck me, I didn’t want to miss this moment to support the two young lovers.

“Gonna take care of you, Noah,” Liam whispered as he moved his hips into place behind Noah. “We’re going to take care of you, do you hear me?”

It sounded like more of a forever kind of vow than anything else, but I couldn’t let myself think that way. I couldn’t let myself think about anything except this perfect moment.

I searched out Noah’s mouth and swallowed his cry when Liam began breaching him with his cock. Noah huffed against my mouth, but I kept up the gentle kisses until he began kissing me back. One of his hands was on Liam’s hip, the other was somewhere above my head. I had a feeling it was linked with Killian’s.

Noah’s erection was back in full force by the time Liam was halfway inside of him. Both young men moaned when Liam pulled out a little, then slowly slid deeper into Noah. I felt Killian’s cock insistently pressing against my ass, but it wasn’t until Liam was all the way inside of Noah that Killian turned my head, claimed my mouth, and then thrust into me. The pressure and burn had me crying out with joy. Killian’s piercing bumped my prostate repeatedly as he worked himself inside me with gentle rocks of his hips. Noah’s lips feasted on my neck as Killian’s pumps pushed me against the younger man’s body. Killian released my mouth so he could grab my hip. Noah immediately claimed my lips, then Liam’s were there. Noah grunted as Liam shifted his weight onto Noah so he could kiss me. Then, somehow, Killian and Liam were feasting on each other’s mouths.

“Killian, fuck, you need to move,” I ground out.

Killian’s response was to pull almost all the way out of me and then punch his hips forward. I gasped as sheer pleasure tore through me. I would

have liked him to fuck me that way because it would have made me come fast, but I knew I was in for a long, slow ride when Killian murmured, “Open your eyes, my love.”

The sight of Noah and Liam kissing as Liam rocked into Noah from behind made my chest constrict. Despite Noah being considerably shorter and slimmer than Liam, it was like their bodies had been made for one another. I took a second to admire the few tattoos on Liam’s chest that I’d only previously gotten a few glimpses of before dropping my eyes so I could watch Liam’s ass muscles flex hard as he methodically drove into Noah. They fit perfectly together... and they moved that way too.

“That’s us, baby,” Killian growled in my ear. “But they’ll look just as beautiful when it’s one of us inside of them or them in us...”

Liam and Noah stopped kissing so they could watch us as Killian spoke to me. Like always, his words had an even stronger hold on me than his body did. I could feel Noah’s hand sliding up and down my chest and Liam’s right hand was grasping my hip. It felt like he was fucking me as he fucked Noah. But it felt that way with Killian too. I was being loved from every possible angle and I’d never felt more relieved in my life.

It was like Liam had said.

I was happy.

But it was like I was happy on top of happy. Just having Killian back had made my world right again, but now... now it was like the sun shone even brighter and the air smelled fresher.

“Liam, Noah, Killian, please,” I begged, not even knowing what I was really asking for. I’d thought this moment would be primarily about Noah, but it was like it was my first time all over again... maybe it was the first time I’d always wanted, dreamed of.

Maybe it wasn’t like finding a home so much as *coming home*.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

KILLIAN

I'd had so many moving encounters with Zak that every time we came together, it felt like there was some new emotion or sensation that I walked away with. But making love to Zak, Liam, and Noah at the same time?

It would take me a lifetime to sort out all the feelings that were bombarding me.

And I *did* consider it making love to all three men, even if I was only inside of Zak.

Because we were all connected in some way.

Not just physically, either.

While Noah was still holding my hand just above Zak's head and Liam was gripping my hip as he fucked in and out of Noah's pliant body, I knew we were linked on a different level. We moved and acted as one. Call it instinct or something else, we each seemed to know when someone else needed an extra caress or brushing of lips because of some errant emotion that was too much to handle alone. We barely spoke, but we said more to each other in that bed than we had most of the night.

Zak and Noah were locked in a heated embrace, each stroking the other as Liam and I fucked our respective partners from behind. Grunts and groans permeated the hot air around us as damp flesh slid over damp flesh. Liam and I worked in unison to pleasure the men who'd given themselves over to us so trustingly, and Noah and Zak sought comfort in one another as we drove them higher and higher. It was a heady experience and I knew even before we finished that one time would never be enough.

I doubted a lifetime of being together like this would ever be enough.

As we each grew closer to finding the ultimate pleasure, we started calling each other's names. There was no shame as I used the same breath to urge Noah and Liam on that I used to command Zak to come for me. When his ass clamped down on mine, there was no hesitation for me to watch as he and Noah captured each other's cries of relief in hot, wet kisses. I had no qualms about grabbing Liam's hand and putting it on Zak's dick as he shot load after load onto Noah's abdomen and I felt nothing but ecstasy as I did the same to Noah and felt his hot semen sliding over my hand. And when I finally came deep inside of Zak's body just seconds after Liam shouted in relief, I called out to all three men as the blinding pleasure consumed me.

And when Noah woke up screaming just a couple of hours later and I worked with my men to bring him comfort, I vowed to myself that we'd do anything and everything to bring our younger lover back from the darkness that was so intent on trying to steal him away.



I KNEW WHO IT WAS THAT WAS TOUCHING ME LONG BEFORE I WAS FULLY awake. But even if I hadn't known whose touch it was, the fact that the fingers were so focused on the scar running up and down my chest told me it was Noah. I'd noticed Zak had often pressed his hand against my chest in the months after the shooting, but I'd never really understood the significance of the move. But seeing Noah's distress the night before as he'd taken in the sight of the ugly scar had given me newfound understanding of what Zak had gone through.

And he'd had to do it by himself.

My parents had been notified of the shooting and had actually shown up at the hospital, but once Zak had introduced himself to them, they'd left again. I'd never heard from them again after that. Zak hadn't had any of his own family to lean on, so it'd been just him by my side waiting to see if I would pull through.

Admittedly, the shooting hadn't done much to really scare me. I hadn't been in a good place mentally, but Zak had still been the most important thing in my world... more important than my own life, so it'd been an easy decision when he'd asked me to give up being a cop. Yes, sometimes I

missed it and I knew construction work wasn't something I could probably spend the rest of my life doing, but it was like I'd told Zak the night before – my dreams had changed and I was living them with him.

Of course, somehow in the span of less than twenty-four hours, a new dream that included Noah and Liam was starting to take shape in my mind, though I was trying really hard not to let it.

Some dreams just seemed too big to hope for.

"Morning, beautiful," I murmured. Noah was resting his head on my pectoral muscle as he toyed with my scar. His pretty green eyes lifted to meet mine. He looked tired, but content.

Which was pretty good, considering how bad his nightmare had been.

The fact that he'd woken up screaming was proof that whatever dream was plaguing him night after night was evolving. He'd struggled against all three of us violently as he'd tried to escape us. He hadn't spoken at all, but the screaming had been this horrifying wail of terror that still chilled me to the bone. Zak and I had been forced to hold Noah down as Liam had talked to him in the hopes of getting him to wake up. We'd gotten the proof that it'd been another sleepwalking event when Noah had suddenly gone silent, then started to cry and relaxed in Zak's and my grip. When we'd released him, he'd curled into Liam's body and sobbed until he'd fallen back asleep. Zak and I had shifted positions so we could keep the younger men between us. Liam had cried too, but he'd waited until Noah was asleep before he'd done it. Zak had been at Liam's back so as I'd held Noah, Zak had held Liam and promised him Noah would be all right... that we'd get him the help he needed. Liam had eventually turned back over and snuggled up against Noah and we'd all managed to eventually fall asleep, though I suspected I'd been last, since apparently, I hadn't stirred when everyone else had gotten out of bed.

Noah's hair was damp, and he smelled like Zak's shampoo. I could hear the shower running in our bathroom.

"It's just you and me this morning?" I asked as I ran my hand up and down Noah's spine.

He shifted a little so he could look up at me and nodded. He pointed in the direction of the bathroom.

"Are they both in there?" I asked.

Noah nodded.

"I assume they're not checking each other for moles?"

Noah scrunched up his mouth at me and then smiled. He shook his head. I ran my fingers through his damp hair.

“Why didn’t you stay in there with them?”

His answer was to push up onto his elbow so he could kiss me. It was soft and sweet and when he was done, he stared at my mouth, then ran his finger over my lower lip.

“Noah?”

He must have heard something in my voice because he stilled but didn’t look at me.

“You’re starting to remember, aren’t you?” When he didn’t respond, I added, “It’s not just a nightmare, is it? It’s a memory.”

He began toying with my lip again.

“Did Zak tell you about the kid I shot?”

Noah nodded his head. He finally turned his eyes so he was looking at me straight on.

“I started to drink so I could drown him out. His voice... his face... all of it. And it would work for a while. But he always comes back.”

Noah crossed his arms on my chest and pressed his cheek against my skin, presumably so he could listen to my heart beating.

“I wish I could tell you that talking to someone would make that memory go away, but I think the most it can do is help you accept it and deal with it. Zak and Liam and I will be here to listen whenever you want to tell us about it, but a professional will be able to give you – all of us, actually – the tools to help you get through this. I’m going to see this lady next week to talk to her about the stuff I’m dealing with... do you think you might want to come and meet her?”

He didn’t move for the longest time. In fact, I started to wonder if he’d even heard me. But when he finally nodded a moment later, it was all I could do not to let out a huge sigh of relief.

His new position meant he was lying perpendicular to me. His pretty, very naked ass was on full display for me.

“Are you sore, sweetheart?” I asked as I ran my hand down his back and over his ass. He shivered and shook his head. I gripped the curve of one cheek gently. “Still, we’ll need to go easy on you for a few days,” I mused, even as I ran my fingers down to massage the sensitive skin between his hole and his balls. Noah sucked in a breath and closed his eyes. Then he shook his head again. He reached back to grab my hand and urge it closer to

his opening. I smiled and gave in to his request. He groaned when I rubbed my finger over his entrance. When he tried to push his ass onto the digit, I gave him a gentle slap that had him jumping in surprise. I immediately rubbed the spot. Within seconds, Noah was pushing up against my hand as he tried to get more out of the touch.

“Did Liam’s cock feel good in this sweet little ass of yours, Noah?” I asked.

His eyes were luminous as he watched me. He quickly nodded. I was still petting his backside but every time he moved, I stopped my hand. When he stopped, I moved. It took him practically no time to pick up on the message. I slid my finger between his crack again.

“I couldn’t take my eyes off you as you took him inside you. I kept thinking about how hot and tight you probably felt. I was imagining what it would be like to watch him come inside you and then have Zak get behind you.”

Noah’s cheeks reddened and his breathing increased. I put more pressure on his hole.

“I was thinking about when it was my turn what it would feel like to slide through Liam’s and Zak’s juices as I rode you from behind. I wanted to watch you suck Liam’s dick as he rode Zak. I wanted you filled up from both ends, but I wouldn’t have let you come.”

I hadn’t intended to be so brutally honest with all the fantasies I was having about him and Liam and Zak, but the more I talked, the more beautifully Noah reacted. He was naturally submissive and didn’t try to quell his responses.

It was an intoxicating formula.

I lifted my finger to my mouth so I could get it wet. Then I put it back on Noah’s hole. He pushed up so he could bear down on the pressure I was putting on him. But like before, I didn’t move and he let out a frustrated groan. He dropped his hips and lay perfectly still. I rewarded him by easing the tip of my finger inside of him.

“Do you think you would have been able to hold out, little one?” I asked. My own dick was eagerly bouncing against my belly.

Noah’s eyes were closed as he tried to relax his body enough to get more of my finger inside of him. He nodded as his breaths huffed out of him.

“Do you want to know what your reward would have been?” I asked.

He opened his eyes and nodded eagerly.

“Come here and I’ll give you a preview.” I pulled my finger out of him and used a hand on his hip to guide him. He shot me confused glances as I positioned him so he was straddling my chest but facing my feet. “Bend over, sweetheart. Let me see what Liam did to your pretty little hole.”

If he was blushing before, he was practically fire-engine red as his eyes went wide.

But he did it.

God love him, he obeyed every order I gave him until his ass was pressed up against my chin and he was splayed out for me on all fours. I started out slow, just licking and pressing gentle kisses to his opening. But when he started mewling and pushing his ass against my probing tongue, I intensified the caresses. Noah’s hips rolled against my upper body as he fucked himself on my mouth and when I put my tongue inside of him, I swore he shouted what sounded like my name. I could feel his dick smearing pre-cum across my chest.

I massaged his hole over and over until he was a whimpering, needy mess. But the little tease somehow managed to turn the tables on me because I suddenly felt something hot and wet against the head of my dick.

“Fuck!” I called out.

Noah took advantage of my distraction and took more of me into his mouth. His tongue played with my piercing. His moves were unpracticed and somewhat clumsy, but I loved every fucking second of it. I barely had enough brain power left to get my mouth back on his opening.

I had no clue how long we’d been pleasuring each other for when I heard Zak murmur, “I told you he was an ass man.”

Noah’s mouth disappeared from my cock but was quickly replaced by Zak’s. Noah sat up, planting his ass on my face. I went to town on his opening. I could see Liam kissing Noah out of the corner of my eye. Then Liam’s head was dropping and I felt not only Zak’s mouth on my cock, but Liam’s as well. The men seemed to be taking turns licking me like I was some delectable treat. I focused on getting my tongue as deep inside Noah’s ass as I could. I heard foil tearing. Liam was kneeling on one side of the bed so I figured he was getting a condom on Noah’s dick. Noah cried out a moment later when Liam’s head started bobbing up and down on him. Zak was expertly sucking me as Noah continued to ride my tongue. I would have loved to be able to see the sight we made as we pleased Noah, but

having my tongue shoved deep inside of him was equally enjoyable. When he came about a minute later, his inner muscles tried to close around my tongue. I tongue-fucked him through his orgasm, then tore my mouth free when Zak sent me over the edge. I wasn't sure if Liam and Zak got themselves or each other off, but I did know one thing.

They came all over me.

It was the hottest, dirtiest encounter I'd had in a long time.

And I fucking loved every second of it.

At some point, Noah turned around and kissed me, but it was Zak who eventually took my hand and led me to the shower. I happily went and when I looked over my shoulder, I saw Liam and Noah making out in our bed.

I couldn't help but think that if they weren't going to be in the shower with me and Zak, then together in our bed was the next best thing.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

LIAM

“Is today going to be the day?” I asked Waldo as I watched him warily while he sat on his perch. I’d spent the last two weeks trying to bribe the toucan into letting me touch him because I was his last holdout in the house, but so far the fresh orange or banana I gave him every morning had failed to impress the bird. Sure, he’d still eat the fruit, but I was rewarded with an irritated peck each time I attached the fruit to the little holder on his perch so he could peck at it without knocking it to the floor.

Today was no different, and I snatched my hand back before Waldo’s sharp little beak could make contact with my skin. He never pecked me hard enough to actually leave a mark, but it was more the message that still bummed me out.

“He’ll get there, babe,” I heard Killian say as he entered the kitchen.

“He hates me,” I remarked as I quickly gave Skittles and Blueberry their treats. The parrot and macaw actually liked me, so I took a minute to give them each a little pet. I’d already fed all the other animals, so everybody was happily eating when I turned to head back toward the stove.

And ran right into Killian.

He kissed me hungrily as his arms went around me. He was already dressed for work, even though it was still dark out.

“Mmmm, morning,” he said when he pulled back from me.

“Morning,” I responded, sounding as wobbly as I felt.

“How you feeling this morning?” he asked with a grin.

A knowing grin.

“Like you don’t know,” I said snidely. I was careful as I tried to move around him so he wouldn’t notice how stiffly I was walking, but I couldn’t really hide the fact that my ass felt like it was on fire. Being fucked five ways to Sunday tended to do that to a guy.

Killian and Zak had been feeling particularly dominant the night before and it’d been like they’d had a personal bet going to see which one of them could fuck me the longest without making me come. I’d been buried deep inside of Noah most of the time, but I’d followed every order I’d been given not to come. I’d gotten Noah off twice and Zak had come deep inside me before Killian had rewarded me with a fierce pounding that had left me pressed motionless against Noah as I’d been rocked with the most intense orgasm of my life. I was still pretty sure I’d blacked out for a while because I couldn’t remember Killian getting off.

While getting fucked hard by all three men, and yes, it was all three because Zak and Killian had decided Noah should get a turn too at some point, had been incredible, there was one part that I didn’t like.

That the guys still had to wear condoms when they were inside of me.

I’d tested negative for everything a week earlier, but we’d all known the safest route would be to use condoms for intercourse when I was either doing the giving or receiving. Which meant I was the only one who didn’t get to feel the burn of my men’s loads deep inside of me and I didn’t get to leave my mark on any of them. Well, not quite true... I did have the pleasure of watching them swallow my essence during oral, since Zak had said it would be safe to have oral sex without condoms.

But I was counting the months before I’d get to have every piece of my men.

Killian grabbed me and pulled me carefully back to him. His kiss turned soft and sweet. “Sorry, we were a little rough with you last night... are you really—”

“I’m perfect,” I cut in, then I kissed him more passionately. “Last night was perfect.”

Killian seemed to relax and that just warmed my heart even more. After two weeks of pretty much nonstop sex, we were all still getting to know what the others liked. Some nights it was just a tangle of limbs as we came together in what seemed like a seamless dance. Other nights were like last night where we got dirty and raunchy and limits were pushed.

And after two weeks, we'd all had turns with one another and in different variations. Sometimes it was just two of us watching the other two make love. Sometimes it was three while one was made to hold out and do nothing *but* watch. Sometimes it was hard and fast, other times it was slow and sweet and lasted most of the night. Most mornings it would start all over again in the early hours.

There were only two things we hadn't done.

None of us had had sex without the others present.

And we hadn't talked about what any of it meant.

It wasn't unusual to walk into a room and see two or even all three of my partners kissing, but I'd never seen it go beyond that. During the day, life was relatively normal with Zak and Killian going to work and Noah and I hanging out together as he studied to get his online GED and I worked on my resume and job hunted. Noah and I had plenty of opportunities to fuck while Zak and Killian were gone during the day, but we didn't. It didn't feel wrong, exactly. More like, it wasn't time yet. Like we needed to make sure it was part of the dynamic that we'd all just fallen naturally into.

I always had dinner cooking by the time Zak and Killian got home from work. Most nights still had Killian going to an AA meeting, and Zak always went with him, so Noah and I usually watched TV. There'd been a few times this week where I'd gone with Killian while Zak had stayed home with Noah. On those days, I sat in a little diner near the church where the meeting was held and studied new recipes that I could try at home for my men. When Killian and I would get home, we'd find Zak and Noah cuddling on the couch in the den.

But the second it was the four of us and things were done for the day, we were in Zak and Killian's room. Between rounds of lovemaking we talked about anything and everything, though admittedly, Noah was still the wildcard. He was more communicative when it came to writing down stuff about himself and what he thought about a particular topic, but he was limiting using his actual voice to calling for one or more of us during intimate moments.

And the nightmares he was having were growing more frequent and more violent.

He'd gone from having one a night to having two or three, and instead of only crying or whimpering as he tried to get away, he'd started lashing

out. He was never awake during any of them, but the increased frequency was making him more and more fearful of going to sleep.

Which meant he was likely remembering things in more detail.

He'd gone with Killian twice to see the psychologist Killian was talking to, but on those days, Noah wasn't interested in doing anything but playing with the animals when he got back home. He'd given the psychologist permission to talk to Killian about the sessions she had with Noah, but so far there hadn't been much progress. Like with his earlier therapists when he'd been a kid, Noah was reluctant to communicate. But the psychologist suspected much of what Zak had suggested to me... that Noah's mutism was related to his father's death and that the dreams were happening more and more because Noah was feeling safer on a day-to-day basis.

It made sense on the one hand, but on the other, it was hard to acknowledge that the more we protected and loved Noah, the more it was hurting him.

"Good," Killian said. "Zak and I will be home early tonight. Dr. Clark said she'd be here around five."

I nodded.

Zak had been able to find someone who'd worked for the same missionary group that Noah's father had worked for. Zak didn't know the man personally... it was a knew-a-guy-who-knew-a-guy type of thing. The man had agreed to come to the house this afternoon, along with Killian and Noah's psychologist, to share what he knew about Noah's father. Noah had already decided he wasn't interested in meeting the man, but we'd asked his psychologist to come just in case he changed his mind and so that she could hear what the man had to say. We'd decided to have the conversation at the house because it was where Noah felt the safest.

I, myself, was terrified of what we'd learn. Part of me didn't want Noah to have to go through any of it, while another part of me knew it had to be this way for him to start to heal from the trauma. As much as I loved Noah's voice, I didn't care if he never spoke. I just wanted him to be whole... and be able to sleep through the night.

"Okay. Here, I made your lunch," I said. "That food truck shit isn't good for you."

I went to grab the insulated bag from the fridge. I had another one in there for Zak.

“Tuna crostini,” I said as I handed him the bag. The dish was technically supposed to be an appetizer, but Killian had loved it so much after I’d made it for the first time a few nights earlier that I’d made larger portions this morning for his lunch. “There’s leftover stew in there too. You have a microwave on site if the Thermos doesn’t keep it hot enough, right?”

Killian chuckled and leaned down to kiss me. “Yes, Mom.”

“Fuck off,” I muttered good-naturedly as I gave him a light shove.

“Be careful if you guys take the car somewhere,” Killian said. “It’s snowing. It won’t accumulate too much, though.”

Zak and Killian had started driving to work together so Noah and I had a car in case of an emergency, but since I didn’t have a license, we hadn’t wanted to risk driving it. I’d pointed that out a few times, but Killian and Zak said they felt better knowing we had a working car if we needed it.

But none of that was even on my radar as I caught on one word.

“Snow?”

Killian had snuck a crostini out of his bag and was munching on it. “Yeah,” he said. He motioned over his shoulder. “First snow of the season. Won’t be the last, though—”

I hurried past him and went to the window. I could see snow flurries in the light hanging over the barn.

“It’s snowing,” I said in disbelief. I rushed past Killian and ran up the stairs. I wasn’t the least bit surprised to find Zak and Noah kissing and cuddling in the bed. They usually talked in the morning after Killian and I got up.

“Noah, come quick,” I said as I grabbed his hand and practically yanked him from the bed. He wasn’t dressed, but I didn’t care. I snagged one of Killian’s sweatshirts off a side chair and thrust it at Noah as he groggily followed me.

“Liam, what is it?” Zak called.

“Come see!” I yelled.

The dogs began barking excitedly as I dragged Noah down the stairs. He was trying to get the shirt on while still holding onto my hand. Killian was at the base of the stairs watching us with curiosity. I ignored him and pulled Noah to the back door. “Shoes,” I demanded as I pointed to a pair of Killian’s boots.

Noah had managed to get the sweatshirt on, which fell to his knees, and he obediently stepped into the boots. I dragged on a pair of Zak’s shoes,

since they were the closest, and then I took Noah's hand again and pulled him out the back door, making sure to close it behind us so Waldo and the other birds wouldn't get out.

"Noah, look, snow!" I said. Our motion caused the floodlights to go off so the back yard lit up and the snow became easier to see.

Noah froze in place as he looked up at the sky. Then he held out his hands. I'd seen snow plenty of times because my parents and I had vacationed in Vermont when I'd been younger, but when Noah had told me that he'd never seen it but desperately wanted to, it'd become my life's mission to show him.

There was a small amount of accumulation on the ground, so I held onto Noah's arm so he wouldn't slip. He appeared fascinated by the flakes that were accumulating on his palms. Several long beats passed before he looked at me. I felt like my world was finally complete when he smiled a huge smile and then threw his arms around me.

"I promised you, baby, remember?" I said.

Noah nodded against me, then pulled back and kissed me hard. His hands stroked over my cheeks, then through my hair. The snow was becoming heavier now.

Zak and Killian appeared by our sides a moment later. Killian had grabbed his heavy work coat and put it around Noah's body while Zak did the same for me with his jacket. I wanted to point out to Zak that he was less dressed than me, but when he put his arm around me from behind, I didn't care. I held on to it as I watched Killian zip Noah up as Noah tried to catch the snowflakes with his tongue.

"He's never seen snow?" Zak asked.

I shook my head. "I promised him I'd show him."

"Another promise kept, baby," Zak murmured as he kissed my temple.

I almost pointed out that we were only here because of him and Killian, but I held my tongue. I no longer cared what had brought us here. All I cared about was whether or not we'd get to stay.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

NOAH

I liked snow, especially the sound it made. Although, realistically, I knew it wasn't the snow itself making the sound... it was more like the snow meant the world around us sounded louder. Like everything went silent while snow was falling and the only sound that was left was the Earth's heartbeat or something.

"You ready to head back?" Liam asked.

I shook my head and glanced at him. I held up my free hand and he quickly nodded.

"Five minutes. Definitely," he agreed.

He was holding my other hand and had been rubbing my fingers as we'd watched the stream trickle over the little rocks that lined it. It wasn't cold enough for the water to have frozen over yet, but Killian had said it would be in a couple of weeks. He'd told Liam how to get to the stream that he and Zak had dubbed their "spot." I'd never heard of people having such a thing, but I could see why they'd chosen it. It was incredibly peaceful.

"Are you happy, Noah?"

I wished I could tell him that I was.

Happier than I'd ever been.

But it wasn't completely true.

Because Killian, unfortunately, had been right. And as much as I loved Killian, I'd really, really wanted him to be wrong about one particular thing.

The nightmare wasn't a nightmare and it most definitely wasn't going away. I still had no memory of my behavior during an episode, but from the terror in Liam's voice as he'd held me and promised me everything would

be okay afterwards, and the way Zak and Killian watched me with concern, I knew it had to be bad.

I was starting to remember more and more little things too.

Lots of screams.

Women crying.

Men yelling.

The smell of burnt flesh.

But nothing stood out to me more than my father's own agonized screams. I wasn't sure how I knew they were his, but I did.

"Are you happy *here*?" Liam asked after a minute.

I answered that quickly with a nod. *That* I was very certain about.

Every moment I spent with Liam and Zak and Killian and the house full of well-loved and very-wanted strays made me wonder how I'd ever survived without those things. I had no doubt anymore that I was in love with Zak and Killian as much as I was with Liam, but I hadn't told them so. I wasn't even sure how Liam would take it. He seemed as happy as me and I swore I could see the love in his eyes every time he looked at either man, but I wasn't a hundred percent sure. I wanted to believe in my heart that it wasn't wrong to love all three men the way I did, but I knew that the world around me wouldn't share that same viewpoint. But the very idea of having to choose any one of them over the other two made my heart pound frantically in my chest and made it hard to breathe... much like the early versions of my nightmares had done.

I'd tried to remind myself to keep some emotional distance between myself and Zak and Killian, but they made it impossible. Killian was always so patient and kind with me, but he didn't treat me with kid gloves the way Liam and Zak sometimes had a tendency to do, especially when it came to sex.

Zak and I would usually cuddle every morning while he talked to me about one of his favorite subjects... history. He'd told me about the house and the farmer who'd built it and the role he'd played in freeing hundreds of slaves. I'd gotten to see all the corridors behind the walls where former slaves had been able to access the tunnel that led to the barn. Zak had even taken me to town to show me some of the historical landmarks.

During the day, I spent most of my time with Liam. When I wasn't studying to get my GED, I was helping him cook or clean or take care of the house.

I spent as much time with each man individually as I did with them together and it felt like the most natural thing in the world. When Zak kissed me even if Killian wasn't around, I still loved it. When Killian murmured dirty things into my ear as we went over the stuff for Waldo's beak prototype, I got turned on and we usually ended up making out on the couch in his office until we were breathless. With Liam, we kissed and touched almost constantly.

But no matter how hot and heavy things got between any of us, it never went beyond kissing. If we did work each other up to that point, we usually sought each other out and headed up to Killian and Zak's room.

Yes, I was so very happy here.

But it was hard to keep living only a half truth.

I didn't want to hurt Liam for anything, but I knew I wasn't doing him any favors by lying to him.

I held up my hand and made a writing motion. Not surprisingly, Liam said, "Yeah, I have them here."

He got the notepad and pen I usually wrote my notes on from his pocket.

It took me a long time to figure out how to tell him what I needed to say. Thankfully, there was no darkness trying to suck me under, but unfortunately, the explanation I wanted to give him wasn't there either.

Because I couldn't really explain it.

I love you.

I showed the notepad to him. He smiled at me like he always did when I told him those words.

"I love you, too," he said.

Yep, *his* words still got *me* every time too.

I put the pen to paper again, but the words were so fucking hard to write.

I'm sorry, Liam.

I began to tear up as I tried to write the rest. I managed to only write Zak and Killian's names and nothing else. Liam pulled me against him as silent tears streaked down my face.

"I know, Noah," he said. He took the pen from me and wrote underneath Zak and Killian's names, *I love them too.*

I looked at him in surprise.

“I do. I love them both. As much as I love you. I don’t know how that’s possible, but I can’t pretend anymore that it’s not true...”

It should have been a relief, but something in the way he said it made me cry harder. It was like the day he’d told me not to get too attached to them. His voice had that same fear in it.

And I knew he was right.

Despite everything that happened in bed between the four of us night after night, neither Killian nor Zak had said those words to us. I’d heard them say it to each other, though. Like when Zak was kissing Killian goodbye before Killian and Liam left to go into town for Killian’s AA meeting.

It was exactly what Killian and Zak had tried to warn us about before the first time we’d all made love. Killian had said feelings could get involved and it would get complicated.

He’d been so very right.

“Noah, I think we need to try and accept that this thing between the four of us might come to an end at some point. Remember what they were telling us about—”

I nodded vigorously against his chest because I didn’t want him to say the words out loud.

He didn’t.

“I, um, overheard the waitress at the diner in town talking about how one of the cooks was leaving in a few weeks. Apparently, he’s the owner’s son or something, and he lives in a room above the diner but he’s leaving to join the army. I was thinking about talking to the owner about it... the job and the room.”

I nodded because I loved Liam for thinking that far ahead and wanting to make sure we had a place to go instead of back onto the streets, but my heart was breaking at the thought of not falling asleep in the arms of all my men each night or having dinner with them and hearing about their day or us cuddling together on the too-small couch together to watch a movie.

I wiped at my face and pulled the notepad and pen out of the coat Killian had told me to keep wearing until he could get Liam and me our own.

I can work.

I showed Liam the note and I saw the reluctance there, but it was brief.

“When we get my ID, we can see about getting yours too, okay? But I want us to try and save up enough so you can take some online or local college courses. You’re not wasting that beautiful brain of yours in a dead-end job, Noah. Not if I have anything to say about it.”

I wanted to remind him that he was just as smart and that he still deserved to own his own restaurant someday like he’d always secretly talked about, but he kissed me before I could even get the first word written down. By the time he released me, I was breathless.

And horny.

“We should head back,” Liam said.

I frowned at him.

He laughed like he knew exactly what my problem was. He stood up and took a few steps backward. “Oh, did I forget to mention that Zak and Killian said they’d be home early? As in,” – Liam pretended to look at a nonexistent watch on his wrist – “Right now?”

He suddenly turned and began running toward the trail that led back to the house. The dogs that had accompanied us took off after him. “Last one home comes last tonight!” he shouted over his shoulder.

I took off after him, but I had yet to learn how to walk on snow, let alone run on it, and my erection wasn’t helping matters. So even with his sore ass, Liam beat me home. But as I approached the house and saw him greeting Zak and Killian on the back deck with passionate kisses, I realized even if my men did decide to torture me by making me wait to find my pleasure, would that really be so bad?

No... no it most definitely would not, I said to myself as I hurried up the porch steps and happily claimed my title of bet loser.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

ZAK

“Zak, baby, I need you to talk to me.”
“What?” I whispered. I felt like I was moving through a thick layer of fog as I tried to search out Killian. It helped when he touched my cheek.

“Zak, you’re scaring the shit out of me,” Killian whispered.

His words helped jolt me out of the haze I’d been in.

The soul-sucking haze that had been trying to pull me under for days.

And apparently had finally succeeded.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly.

“Don’t be sorry, just talk to me. Please.”

The desperation in Killian’s voice had me looking up, and I realized Killian was no longer driving. He’d pulled the truck over to the side of the road.

“Did something happen at work?” he asked. “The last few days when we’ve been heading home, you’ve been so quiet...”

God, I was such an asshole. A worthless asshole who didn’t deserve him.

“I love you so much, Killian,” I choked out. “I wish I knew how to prove to you how much.”

Killian unclicked his seatbelt, then mine. He pulled me as close to him as he could, considering the armrest between us. “You never have to prove that to me. I already know.”

“You were right,” I said. “It’s so fucking complicated now.” I shook my head as I dropped my eyes because it hurt to look at him. “I know that’s

why you told Liam and Noah that we shouldn't let any of it happen again. You knew I'd get too attached to them."

"Zak," Killian said softly. It sounded like his very heart was breaking and I knew it was because he hated seeing me hurt.

"Don't do that," I said as I tried to pull free of him. "I don't deserve it."

"Why not?" Killian asked.

"Because I'm a fucking asshole who doesn't deserve *you*."

"Hey," Killian said as he grabbed my chin gently and forced me to look at him. "You remember what you said to me a couple weeks ago? About you needing me to get angry with you? Well guess what, Zak. I'm angry."

"I know, I'm sorry—"

"Shut up, Zak," he snapped.

I closed my mouth and forced myself to keep looking at him. It was the least I could give him.

"Do you think I don't know what you're feeling?" Killian bit out. "I knew I loved you the moment I met you, but I've had seven years to figure out what makes you tick. I see things in you that you can't see in yourself. And I knew two weeks ago when I invited Liam and Noah into our bed what it would mean. For both of us."

I shook my head to deny it. "No, I can't lose you—"

"Shut up," Killian repeated, but there was no harshness in his voice anymore. "You have *not* cheated on me. You have *not* taken something from me to give to someone else. You have *not* done anything to change how much I fucking love you, and will *always* love you. What you've done... what we've *both* done, is fall in love with two incredible young men who earned that love by being exactly who they are. But they didn't *save* our relationship, Zak. Because neither of us would have walked away from each other and we both fucking know that."

I nodded vehemently because he was so very right. I was still trying to process the fact that he was admitting to being in love with Noah and Liam when he continued.

"I've tried to wrap my head around this thing between the four of us for two weeks now and I still don't have an answer for why it works. All I know is that it does. It just *fucking works*. Loving them both isn't taking away from the love I feel for you." Killian began rubbing my chin. "You wear your heart on your sleeve with people you trust, Zak. I knew from the first time we all made love together that you were in love with both of

them. And I knew I wasn't far behind you. But we have to face the fact that us wanting this... them... may not be enough."

"Is that what you want?" I asked. "To try and build a life with them?"

"Not *try*," Killian said. "*Do*. If I knew for sure that they shared our feelings... that they wanted the same thing..." He shook his head. "Well, let's just say they'd be stuck with us like *poly*—"

I kissed him hard to silence him. "Glue, Killian. Just say glue," I said with a laugh, then I dragged him to me for another kiss. He eagerly reciprocated, then broke the kiss. He held the back of my neck firmly as he looked me in the eye.

"Zak, no matter what happens with Liam and Noah, I need you to promise me something."

"Anything," I said.

"I need you to promise you'll marry me."

"What?" I choked out.

"We can wait to see what happens with Liam and Noah and then decide if we want to make it legal or not, but I want to call you my husband and I want to tell the world that we're the family each of us should have had growing up. I want our kids to know that their fathers, whether they have two or four of them, are going to be together forever—"

"Yes," I blurted. "Yes, Killian. Whenever and however you want, yes. I will most absolutely, positively, definitely marry you."

I kissed him again and by the time we separated, we were both beaming.

"Let's go home, okay?"

I nodded and held his hand as he got the truck started and I re-buckled my seat belt. While I was feeling lighter and excited about the prospect of my future with Killian, I couldn't help but also be worried about what it would be like to have to let Noah and Liam go.

When the house came into view, I forced my fears to the back of my mind and took Killian's hand as he led me inside... and to our other half.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

KILLIAN

“**N**oah doesn’t want to join us?” I asked Liam as he came down the stairs. He shook his head.

Liam had gone upstairs a few minutes earlier to make sure Noah was certain he didn’t want to meet the man who’d introduced himself as Gerald Darby upon arriving at our house. We weren’t certain how well he’d known Noah’s father, but the man was clearly disappointed when he saw Liam’s response.

Noah’s and my psychologist, Dr. Clark, was also in attendance. She’d suggested we give Noah the opportunity to decline one more time but had told us not to push him one way or the other.

“I’ll go sit with him,” Zak said as he got up from the couch. I nodded as he passed me. He gave me a quick kiss on my cheek and then gently touched Liam’s hand as he went by him. Liam looked pale and I could feel him trembling next to me. I couldn’t blame him. I knew whatever we were about to hear would be horrific. I was glad Zak would be sitting with Noah because the last thing I wanted was for him to end up on the stairs listening without any kind of support.

I took Liam’s hand and held it in mine as we sat down on the couch. If Gerald thought it strange, he didn’t react. I’d already told Dr. Clark that Zak and I were in a relationship with Noah and Liam. It wasn’t something I would have necessarily told a therapist if it’d just been about me, but I’d figured it could impact Noah’s treatment, so I’d told her that the four of us were still trying to work through everything. For her part, she hadn’t seemed judgmental about any of it. It was still early on in my own therapy,

and while it wasn't the easiest thing in the world, I was willing to do the work if it meant I could finally put Ryder Stanfield to rest.

"Well," Gerald began as he looked at the stairs briefly, then back at me and Liam. "I'll admit, I was hoping to see Noah, but it's probably better if he not hear any of this."

"You knew Noah when he was a child?" I asked.

Gerald nodded. "His father and I worked together for several years. Our mission provided health care to some of the poorest villages in South Africa. Nathan – that was Noah's father –and his wife moved to the area a few years before Noah was born. They'd been told they'd never be able to have children, so Noah was a true gift from God. They were both overjoyed when they learned she was pregnant. Tragically, Noah's mother died a few days after giving birth to him... we suspected it was a brain aneurysm. Nathan considered taking Noah back to the States, but he loved his work and wanted Noah to grow up in the world Nathan had come to cherish. I've never seen a father who loved his child more," Gerald murmured. He reached into a black bag he'd brought with him and took out a framed picture.

"I was able to get this from his office before the authorities closed the clinic. I discovered a few of his journals too, though most of them would have been in the house so they perished in the fire."

"Fire?" I said as I took the picture he handed me. I held it so Liam could see too. It showed a man and little boy standing next to a baby elephant. The man and boy had the same light blond hair. The man was positively beaming and the boy, Noah, was petting the elephant with one hand and holding his father's hand with the other. He looked so happy...

"How old is he here?" I asked.

"Five," Gerald said. "He was such a delightful child to be around. So happy and kind. He loved playing with the village children, but the animals were his favorite. And he was such a chatterbox... always asking questions. He'd help his father out in the clinic by organizing things and bringing water to the patients waiting in line to be given their immunizations or to get treated."

Liam and I exchanged glances and smiled, presumably about the same thing.

The idea of Noah being a chatterbox.

“Is the fire what killed his father?” I asked as I set the picture on the coffee table.

The smile on Gerald’s face that had appeared as he’d talked about Noah faded. “No, though that would have been a better way for him to go.”

The man looked green around the gills as he said, “There were a few tribes in the area who weren’t part of the village and didn’t believe in things like modern medicine. Sometimes they would trade with the people in the village for things, but they weren’t interested in the care we were offering and we never pushed it on them. One day about a month before Nathan died, a young mother from one of the tribes brought her daughter to the clinic. The girl wasn’t more than ten. She was very sick... it was a blood infection. It had been caused by a poorly performed procedure.”

“Procedure?” Liam asked.

“Some of the practices the tribes believed in were very barbaric. Genital mutilation was one of the cruelest. They believed that by removing a woman’s clitoris, she wouldn’t stray from her husband. The procedure was often done before the girl reached sexual maturity. No anesthesia or sedation was used... the child was just held down and...”

Gerald’s words dropped off. I felt like I was going to be sick. Liam’s hand squeezed mine hard.

“As I said, one of the mothers brought her child in. Nathan was able to save the little girl. The mother, who’d had the same thing done to her, didn’t want to return to the tribe. She had two other daughters who were only a year or two away from the procedure themselves. A few of the villagers housed the woman and her children and then ultimately helped them escape. Word began to spread and more women began showing up seeking asylum. While our group wanted to support the women, we knew it was also putting our members in danger. Most volunteered to stay, but Nathan had a son to think about. He loved his work, but he loved Noah more. The night before he and Noah were set to leave, members of one of the tribes attacked the village. From what we can tell, Nathan was able to get himself and Noah out of the house after the men showed up. The woman who lived with them and cared for Noah wasn’t so fortunate. She was... she was brutalized,” Gerald murmured.

The older man pulled in a breath and reached for the glass of water we’d offered him when he’d arrived. His fingers were trembling as he drank. I tried to prepare myself for what he was going to say next, but I

knew I wouldn't manage it. I was terrified for the little boy and his father and I already knew how the whole thing had turned out.

"My wife and I had been in the States to be with our daughter while she gave birth to our first grandchild, but we'd landed in Cape Town the day before the attack. I returned to the village after authorities deemed it safe the next morning. Dozens of villagers had been slaughtered. Men, women, children... no one had been spared. Nathan's house was gone... burned to the ground. His housekeeper's body was found outside the home but there was no sign of Nathan or Noah. I begged the authorities to keep searching for them since their bodies weren't among the villagers, either. The village was surrounded by The Bush which was filled with all kinds of predators. We searched for hours. Authorities said that even if Nathan and Noah had survived the attack, the chances that they'd survived in The Bush overnight were unlikely. We were on the verge of calling off the search when a body was discovered about half a mile from the village."

Gerald covered his eyes for a moment as he tried to hold back his emotions. "They told me not to look, but I had to know if it was one or both of them." Gerald wiped at a few stray tears. "It was Nathan. It looked like he'd been..." Gerald sucked in a breath. "Like he'd been mauled by a wild animal... but the marks on his body were made by human weapons. There were signs that he'd been tortured..."

"What about Noah?" Liam choked out.

Gerald shook his head. "We found him less than three hundred feet away. He was lying in some heavy brush, not moving at all. He had one hand covering his ear, the other was over his mouth. He hadn't made one sound, even as we'd called for him. There was no way he hadn't heard us."

My stomach fell out as I remembered Noah's position when I'd found him in the woods the night he'd run out of the house.

"Noah knew me, my voice," Gerald continued. "But even once I reached him, he wouldn't respond to me. He wasn't wounded, thankfully, but he was so close to where his father had been killed that he must have heard everything."

"Oh God," Liam whispered. He ripped his hand from mine and stumbled to his feet. I bolted after him as he ran to the guest bathroom that was near the kitchen. I reached it just as he began throwing up into the toilet.

I grabbed a towel and dropped to my knees next to him. He sobbed as he retched over and over again. When his stomach was empty, I wiped at his face and pulled him into my arms. "Killian, oh God, Killian!"

"I know, baby," I whispered as I held him. Tears streamed down my own cheeks as I realized that not only had a then ten-year-old Noah had to listen to his father die, he was reliving it night after night now. He was *remembering*...

Liam and I sat there on the cold bathroom floor for a long time, just holding on to one another. When we finally forced ourselves to get up, Liam washed his mouth out with some water and then he took my hand and let me lead him back to the living room. Dr. Clark was talking quietly to Gerald. It seemed like she was trying to comfort the man.

When she saw us, she got up and came over to us. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yeah," Liam whispered.

I nodded.

"When Dr. Darby has left, I'd like to talk to you guys about how you're feeling and what this means for Noah, okay?" she said gently.

I felt numb but managed to say, "Yes, thank you." I'd wanted Noah to deal with his trauma so he could move past it, but I hadn't envisioned anything like this. "Thank you for being here," I added. "We... we need to know how to support Noah through all this."

Dr. Clark nodded and rubbed my arm reassuringly.

We all sat back down. Gerald looked pale and tired. I couldn't even imagine what it had to have been like to see his friend's body like that.

"After we found Noah, my wife and I took him back to the States with us. He didn't interact with us at all. He wouldn't speak or even acknowledge us. He spent most of his time curled up in a ball in the corner of the room we'd given him. The only time he reacted to me was when I gave him one of his father's journals. We took him to a therapist, but he wouldn't interact with her at all, either. There was talk of institutionalizing him so he could be medicated when his aunt showed up. She was his mother's sister. She didn't seem particularly thrilled about being named his legal guardian. She kept making comments about how her sister never should have been in that savage place. I got the impression that there hadn't been much of a relationship between her and Nathan after Noah's mother died."

“So Marjorie took him, just like that?” Liam asked.

Gerald nodded. “We asked her if we could keep in touch because we were so fond of Noah and wanted to make sure he was okay, but she refused to give us her information. She said it would be easier for Noah to get over the whole thing if he didn’t have any reminders of it. We never saw him again after that. She didn’t even want the picture of Noah and his father. She let him keep one of the journals but only because he was holding on to it when she came for him and he refused to let it go.”

Gerald reached into his bag and pulled out several small, leather-bound journals. He placed them on the coffee table.

I reached for one and scanned through it. Noah’s name appeared over and over in every single entry that I looked at.

Nathan really had loved his son.

We spoke with Gerald for a few more minutes before we said our goodbyes and promised to have Noah get in touch if and when he was ready. Dr. Clark stayed for another half hour and explained what to say to Noah and what to do if he did start talking about that night. She said that he was more likely to open up to the three of us about it before he was willing to talk to her. The biggest thing was that we needed to let Noah lead the conversation.

We said our goodbyes to Dr. Clark. Admittedly, the urge to drink was stronger than I would have liked, mostly because I felt so out of control and helpless. Liam must have noticed something in my reaction as I closed and locked the front door because he came up behind me and put his hand on my back. “Do you need to go to a meeting, Killian?”

I shook my head. “I need to be with you and Noah and Zak.”

Liam nodded and took my hand. I followed him upstairs. When we got to our room, we found Zak and Noah sitting on the far side of the bed. Noah seemed to be staring out the window and Zak was holding his hand. When we went around the bed, I saw that Waldo was sitting in Noah’s lap.

Zak’s eyes met mine. I knew he could tell I was on the verge of losing it.

Just like Liam had noticed downstairs.

Liam sat down on Noah’s other side and caressed his temple. “Noah, will you lie down with me for a bit?” he asked.

Noah nodded. Zak stood and kissed the top of both men’s heads, then reached for Waldo. The bird, surprisingly, didn’t protest. Zak set Waldo on

the footboard, then reached for my hand. I followed him to the bathroom and let him undress me and get the shower started. I knew I'd need to repeat the story for him, but it was the last thing I wanted to do.

What I really wanted to do was kick the shit out of something.

And I wanted to drink however many bottles of liquor it took to not have to think about the little boy who'd had to listen to his father die a brutal, ugly death.

Zak took his own clothes off and pulled me into the shower. I waited until I was sure the sound of the water was drowning out any sound I would make, then I wrapped my arms around Zak, pressed my mouth against his shoulder, and cried for all I was worth.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

LIAM

Noah didn't ask about Gerald Darby for three days.

He also didn't get out of bed or interact with any of the animals or show any interest in the snow that fell steadily outside until there were several inches of it covering the ground. He barely slept or ate. When he did shut his eyes, the nightmare was right *there* and he'd wake up screaming.

But not just any screams.

He kept calling for his father.

And saying he was sorry.

Actual words.

It was fucking killing us all.

Killian and Zak had both taken off work so that someone was with Noah around the clock. He let us hold him and he listened as we reassured him that he was safe and that we wouldn't leave him, but he didn't speak to us directly or write anything down for us. He ate when we begged him to, but it was rarely more than a few bites. Killian was talking to Dr. Clark every day to give her an update and while she'd reassured us we were doing the right thing, Noah's health continued to decline. Zak had finally started an IV just to keep Noah from getting too dehydrated.

We were currently all lying in bed together, even though it was the middle of a Sunday afternoon. The three of us didn't really talk a lot while we were in bed with Noah because we wanted him to rest as much as possible, but when one of us needed to rage or cry or deal with the fear that was coursing through each of us, we were never alone. It was like we took

turns being strong for each other when we weren't all being strong for Noah.

It was Waldo who ended up doing what none of us had the guts to do.

The toucan had been at his post on the footboard for nearly all of the three days, going downstairs only long enough to eat.

I was mid-doze with Noah in my arms when he jolted against me and actually yelled, "Ow!"

At first, I thought he was having a nightmare, but when he scrambled upright and grabbed his hand, I realized he was very much awake. Killian and Zak must have fallen asleep at some point too, because Zak nearly fell out of bed when Killian lurched to a sitting position.

"Noah, what is it? Are you okay?" Killian asked even as he grabbed Zak's arm to keep him from tumbling off the bed.

Noah didn't answer him as he pulled the hand with the IV in it closer to his chest as Waldo made a jump for it. The bird was sitting between him and Killian.

"Waldo," Killian called as he reached for the toucan.

Waldo flapped his wings wildly and tried to peck at Killian's hands. The bird had clearly gone off the rails because he'd never once showed any kind of aggression toward Noah.

But now he was going after him repeatedly.

Well, not so much Noah, but the IV line that was in the back of Noah's hand. The bird seemed fascinated by it.

"Grab him, Killian," Zak said.

"No," Noah said as he put his hand out to stop Killian. "No, please," he said. His voice still had that rusty quality to it, but the words came more easily than I'd ever heard them come before. He still looked pale and sickly as he said them, though.

We all sat quietly as we watched Noah reach for Waldo. The bird didn't resist when Noah picked him up. He cuddled him against his chest, then held out the hand with the IV in it so Waldo could get a closer look at it. I wondered if the bird thought it was some kind of food, but this time instead of pecking at it, he began rubbing his beak against it.

He did it over and over until Noah put his hand out to Zak and said, "T... take it out... please."

Zak didn't hesitate to do as Noah asked. I figured we were all pretty shocked that Noah was suddenly talking to us... well, talking, period.

Once the IV was gone, Noah lowered his hand to show Waldo. The toucan seemed less agitated. Noah ran his fingers along the bird's long beak. He tilted Waldo's beak a tiny bit so he could get a closer look at the crack that had started to grow longer where what remained of the bird's natural beak met his artificial one. Noah studied it for a long time, then cuddled Waldo against his chest as he shifted his body so he was sitting cross-legged between us.

"He told me we need-ed to be quiet," Noah murmured. His words came out slow and he stuttered here and there, but he continued on his own. "He told me not to make a sound. But... but I did. I heard Bandy scream-ing. I was scared."

It was all I could do not to respond, to reassure him that it was normal that he was scared. But I remembered Dr. Clark's advice to let Noah talk if and when he decided to do so.

Noah set Waldo in his lap and began petting the now calm bird.

"We ran and ran and ran. He told me never to go into The Bush at night but that's where we went. He pushed me down and got behind me. I..."

Noah hesitated, and I saw him swallow hard. He looked physically ill. Killian rubbed his back gently while I kept my hand on his knee, but none of us spoke.

"I couldn't stop scream... screaming. He covered my mouth with his hand. I heard men yelling. I didn't understand them, but I knew they wanted to hurt us. I stopped screaming. But the voices got closer and closer. Dad whispered in my ear that they were coming and that I had to stay where I was, no matter what. He made me promise. He told me not to make a sound. Not one. He told me he loved me and then he was gone."

I could feel tears coursing down my own cheeks as Noah's voice broke.

"I didn't make a sound after that. I knew they were hurting him, but I didn't make a sound. I did what I'd promised. I... I had to keep one hand on my mouth, so I could only cover one ear."

I wrapped my arm around Noah's shoulder and pressed my face against his. The image of Noah lying amidst all that horror and trying to drown out the sounds of his father dying made me want to curl up in a ball with him and never let him go.

"It was my fault," Noah choked out. "If I had been quiet when he first told me to—"

“No,” Killian cut in as he dipped his head so it was at Noah’s level. “No, Noah. Those men would have found you both if you’d stayed in that house. Your father knew that and that’s why he took you and ran.”

“I screamed... I led them to us...”

“Those men were bent on murder. They hunted down every man, woman, and child in that village. They would have kept searching for your father because of who he was. He helped people that they hurt and they wanted vengeance,” Killian explained.

“He left me to lead them away,” Noah whispered.

“He did,” I said. “Because he loved you more than anything. He wanted you to live. You were his greatest joy in life. That was the first thing I saw when Gerald showed us the picture of you two.”

Noah looked at me hesitantly. “He has a picture of my dad?”

I wiped away the tears on Noah’s face. “He left it here for you. Do you want to see it?”

Noah looked back down at Waldo who seemed to be dozing off under Noah’s gentle touch.

Noah nodded.

“I’ll get it,” Zak said.

The three of us sat in silence as we waited for Zak to return, but we didn’t stop touching Noah. Killian’s fingers occasionally reached across Noah’s back to touch me, and I welcomed the caresses. I was scared shitless about saying or doing the wrong thing.

When Zak returned, he handed the picture to Killian. Killian held it so Noah could take it from him when he was ready. It took a good minute before Noah worked up the nerve to reach for it. When he did, he held it just above Waldo’s head and stared at it for a really long time.

Then he cried.

And cried.

And cried.

Killian and I both held him and Zak held on to Killian. Noah’s sobs eventually slowed, then stopped altogether. Killian eased Waldo out of Noah’s lap as I laid him down and pulled him against me. We stayed with Noah until we all ended up falling asleep, and when I next woke up, it was early morning.

Killian and Zak were still asleep, but at some point Zak had switched places with Killian so he could hold Noah.

As I lay there and took in the sight of my men all deep in sleep as the fog began to clear from my mind, a sudden realization hit me.

There'd been no nightmare.

We'd been asleep for nearly eighteen hours straight, and there'd been no nightmare.

I knew that wasn't a guarantee that this whole thing was over, and that Noah had a lot of healing to do, but it was something.

I'd absolutely take *something*.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

ZAK

“Can you p... piss the carr-ots please?”

My fork stilled for just a second over my plate as Noah’s voice broke through the silence as we ate. I knew I’d never tire of hearing it, even when he stuttered a bit as he tried to get the words out.

It’d been three weeks since Noah had told us about the night his father had died, and while we hadn’t talked about it again, I knew it was something he was still dealing with on a daily basis. Besides the normal emotions of guilt and terror that anyone would feel after something like that happened to them, Noah had the added burden of trying to get around his mind’s natural inclination to keep him from speaking. Although his mind had protected him from the trauma of what had happened by blocking it out, it was also working against him because it associated Noah making any kind of sound with danger. Noah admitted that he still had to fight off what he called “the darkness” when he opened his mouth to speak. His psychologist had said that it was like some wires in his brain had gotten crossed and Noah had to work to uncross them... in essence, he had to teach himself that it was safe to speak again.

We were all incredibly proud of Noah because it would have been so easy for him to revert to writing things down or just not saying anything at all.

The proof that Noah’s efforts were paying off came each night when he fell asleep and *stayed* asleep.

No more nightmares.

But while things for Noah had been improving, things between the four of us had hit a bump in the road.

We still spent every night in each other's arms, but we hadn't talked about what our relationship meant. Killian and I were both on edge about whether or not Liam and Noah were interested in making what was happening between us a forever kind of thing, but neither of us had the nerve to bring it up. An emotional distance had seemed to grow between Liam and Noah and us, and Killian and I were worried it was because Noah and Liam were starting to realize they didn't need us as much as they had early on.

Liam and Noah were both set to get their IDs any day now and Noah had earned his GED a few days earlier. He was now job hunting like Liam was. We hadn't told Noah and Liam yet, but Killian and I had contacted a lawyer in California to see what we could do about getting any of Liam's and Noah's possessions from Liam's father, assuming there were any left to begin with. We'd also wanted to make sure there weren't any kinds of warrants pending against Liam for the attack on his father. We'd gotten some good news today that we were both excited to share with Liam and Noah, but that worried us a little too. It wasn't that we wanted Liam and Noah to be fully reliant on us... it was just that we were afraid what would happen once they weren't.

And that day was coming sooner rather than later.

"Here you go," Liam said as he handed Noah the carrots.

"So, um, I have some news," Liam said as he looked at me and Killian. "I got a job at Reggie's."

"You got a job at the diner?" I asked in surprise. It was the little diner near the church where Killian went to his AA meetings.

"Yeah, as a cook," Liam said proudly. "I mean, I won't be making tuna crostini any time soon, but Frank said if I did well then maybe I could create a special for the menu every week."

"That's amazing," Killian said. He leaned in and kissed Liam. "Congratulations."

I got up and went to Liam so I could kiss him too. I couldn't help but notice that Noah looked a little pale.

Once I was sitting again, Liam started picking at his food. He looked at Noah who was fiddling with his glass.

“We have some news too,” Killian said as he cast me a glance. I nodded. We’d intended to wait until we were in bed to have this next part of the conversation, but now was as good a time as any.

“We contacted your father and aunt,” I said as I looked from Liam to Noah.

“What?” Liam said in surprise.

“Well, we had a lawyer do it, actually. We were hoping to get some of your possessions from him,” I explained.

“We also confirmed that there aren’t any charges pending against you, Liam. The fucker probably knew if he called the cops, he’d risk exposing what he did to Noah.”

Liam reached for Noah’s hand. Both men looked relieved.

“The lawyer heard back from your father’s lawyer today. He’s going to comply with the order to turn over your belongings. It includes your stuff from the house as well as your things from college, Liam. Your things too, Noah,” I said. “We had him ask specifically about your father’s journal. He’s already turned that over to the lawyer. It should arrive tomorrow.”

“Really?” Noah whispered.

“Really,” I said with a smile.

“There’s more,” Killian said. “The lawyer was doing some research on your father and discovered there’s a trust set aside for you, Liam. It’s not a huge amount of money, but it’s enough for you and Noah to both attend college. Maybe culinary school for you, Liam?” Killian suggested.

“A trust?” Liam said, dumbfounded.

“Your mother left it for you. It’s supposed to be turned over to you when you turn twenty-five. The lawyer thinks he can get that dropped so you have access to it now... it’ll take a little time, though. But it means you guys won’t have to rely on us as much for things,” Killian added.

“Wow,” Liam said. For some reason he didn’t look as happy as he had a moment ago. He cast Noah a look.

“It’s great news, isn’t it?” I said.

“Yeah, really great,” Liam murmured. “Oh, um, I, um...” – he looked at Noah briefly again and it seemed like Noah nodded – “I forgot to tell you that the job I got... there’s this room above the diner that Frank said he’d rent out to me and Noah for a reduced amount. We, um, thought, maybe it was time for us—”

There was nothing but silence as we all sat there awkwardly. It felt like my heart was ripping in two.

So they *did* want to move on.

I felt Killian's hand cover my knee beneath the table. I dropped my own hand and curled my fingers around his so I'd have something to hang on to.

"That's great," Killian said with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. And his voice didn't sound like his, either. "Your own place... that's great. I mean, we'll miss you around here, but it's good that you're starting fresh and it's not like we won't see you."

I heard Killian babbling about the benefits of living in a small town and how we'd see them all the time and Liam agreeing wholeheartedly, but if they continued the conversation, I didn't know it. I ended up tuning them out as I tried to keep breathing in and out. Killian's fingers were tight around mine, so I focused on his touch instead. I somehow managed to keep eating. I looked at Noah and saw him staring off into space. I almost opened my mouth to say something to him, but then Killian said, "Does that work for you, babe?"

"What?"

"Taking Noah and Liam to their new place tomorrow."

No.

No, it didn't fucking work for me!

"Yeah, sure," I said. "I'm off tomorrow."

"Great."

More conversation followed about packing boxes, but this time I really did tune them out. I went through the motions of doing dishes and helping to feed the animals, but then I excused myself, saying I had a headache. Liam kissed me softly and told me to feel better.

Noah didn't.

He'd already disappeared with a comment about needing to go to the bathroom.

By the time Killian came up to our room a few minutes later, *alone*, I was lying in the middle of our bed.

"I know," I whispered when he pulled me against him so my back was aligned with his front. "We need to let them go. I'm okay."

"Zak," Killian said, his voice all growly.

"What?"

“Turn the fuck around so I can hold you and you can hold me because my heart feels like it’s breaking in two right now.”

I let out a sob and turned around. Killian enveloped me in his arms and we both just clung to each other as we mourned the loss of something we’d probably never really even had to begin with.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

KILLIAN

The place was a hole.

Okay, it wasn't, but it wasn't good enough for Noah and Liam. I doubted my truck would have even fit into the little studio apartment. Hell, *I* barely fit into the tiny bathroom. And the kitchen wasn't more than a single counter with a sink and a fucking hot plate. I already thought Liam was far too talented of a chef to be cooking diner food for Frank and Regina Smalls, but to stick him in a place where there was just a fucking hot plate?

No.

Just no.

And the view sucked. Noah would be miserable not being able to see the trees. What kind of snowball fights were he and Liam supposed to have with a fucking parking lot as their back yard?

But I didn't say any of that, of course.

They'd made their decision and Zak and I weren't it.

I just wanted to get them settled and get the hell out of there so Zak and I could go home and try to make sense of how we were supposed to build a life without them. I'd warned Zak of that very thing more than once but a part of me hadn't really believed it would turn out this way. I knew Zak and I would eventually be okay, and we'd still pursue our dream of having a family, but I had a feeling it would always seem like a piece of us was missing.

None of us had spoken much this morning as we'd packed up my truck with the few boxes of things Noah and Liam had accumulated during their stay with us. Zak and I had purchased all of the things for them, but we'd

always had a hell of a time getting them to accept our gifts. I'd gotten some recipe books for Liam while Zak had gotten them enough clothes to fill much of the closet in the guest room.

Even though they hadn't actually been living in the guest room since the night we'd first made love.

Maybe that should have been a sign that this was how things would end up.

"Do you want us to help you with those last couple?" I asked as I motioned to the small boxes sitting at the base of the steps in the alley next to the diner. I wasn't ready to say goodbye, but I also just wanted to get it over with.

I knew Zak wasn't any better off.

He'd barely said anything this morning as we'd eaten the breakfast sandwiches Liam had made. I'd helped Zak load the truck while Liam and Noah had said goodbye to all the animals. By the time they'd come outside where Zak and I had been waiting, they'd both looked pale and sullen. I'd almost said something then and there about them coming to visit the animals anytime they wanted, but I'd kept my mouth shut because it would have been torture to be around Liam and Noah on a regular basis and not be able to touch them. As it was, I already had plans to find a new place to meet up with Delia for coffee after AA.

"No, I think we're okay," Liam said.

We all stood there awkwardly. I started to reach for Noah since he was closest to me, but he turned and grabbed one of the boxes. I heard him mumble something that sounded like "thank you" but I wasn't sure. I watched him run up the stairs and retreat into the apartment.

Liam stepped into me and gave me and Zak each a quick, completely impersonal hug.

"Thanks for everything."

I wanted to grab him and shake him and ask what was happening.

"You're welcome. We'll be in touch when your stuff arrives," I said. "Take care of each other, okay?"

"You too," Liam murmured as he dropped his eyes. "Bye," he added, then he turned and grabbed the box as he hurried up the stairs.

Zak turned and headed for the truck. I caught up to him and grabbed his hand, then pulled him against me because I could see he was barely keeping it together. "Just a little longer, sweetheart," I said.

Zak nodded and dashed at his eyes. I led him to the passenger seat and got him settled, then closed the door and reached into my coat pocket to grab my keys. I jogged around the front of the truck so I could get us the hell out of there before we both lost it, but stopped when something fell out of my pocket.

I looked down and saw one of the small notepads from our kitchen sitting in the snow at my feet. I briefly recalled telling Noah to wear my coat the day it had snowed for the first time. I'd worn an older one to work so he'd have something until Zak and I had been able to get him and Liam their own winter coats.

I snatched up the notepad and went to jam it back into my pocket when my name jumped out at me.

Then Zak's name.

I held my breath as I scanned the other few words on the pad.

Son of a bitch.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I had to stare at the words for a good ten seconds.

"Killian?" Zak asked as he opened the door.

I turned and hurried back to him, then grabbed his hand and pulled him from the truck.

"What? What is it?" he asked.

"Our future," I said as I handed him the notepad. I heard him gasp behind me as I practically dragged him up the stairs. I didn't knock when we reached the apartment door.

I didn't fucking need to.

I was getting back what was ours.

Zak's and mine.

The first thing I heard was crying when I entered the tiny space. My eyes quickly found Noah and Liam hugging in the so-called kitchen. Liam jumped when the door hit the wall.

Tears were streaking down his face. He quickly dashed at them and then tried to hide Noah's body from view.

"Did you, um, forget something?" he dared to ask.

"Yeah," I bit out, then I grabbed him and kissed him hard. Liam moaned under the onslaught.

"Why?" I asked when I released him. "Why did you do this?"

“Do what?” he asked as he looked at Noah who was in Zak’s arms hanging on to him for dear life. I grabbed the notepad from Zak.

“If this was how you two felt, why the fuck are we standing here right now?” I asked. I handed him the notepad. I’d instantly recognized Noah’s handwriting when I’d read it. But the last line on the note had been Liam’s. “It says you love us ‘too.’” I shot a look at Noah. “Too. So you both?”

Noah nodded before I could even finish the question.

“Why the fuck didn’t you say something?” I asked. “Last night—”

“You wanted us to leave.”

“What?” I asked, dumbfounded by Liam’s response.

“You told us about the trust... you said we wouldn’t be as reliant on you. We thought—”

I kissed him hard. “You know what, I don’t fucking care,” I whispered against his mouth. “I love you, Liam. I love you so fucking much, I ache with it. Just like I love Noah. And just like I love Zak.”

“You do?” he croaked. “But you and Zak have been together for so long and we don’t want to mess up what you—”

I kissed him again, then held out my hand for Zak who pulled Noah along with him until we were all in a little huddle.

“You haven’t messed up anything between us... if anything, you’ve helped us both realize how easy it had become to stop talking to each other rather than count on each other to deal with some really painful shit. But Zak and I love each other as much now as we did seven years ago when we admitted it to each other for the first time. That never has and never will change. No, neither of us was expecting to find love again, but we have. I don’t understand how and why, but I don’t care, either. People will judge us and tell us it’s unnatural and wrong and that we’re immoral, and they’ll fling a whole bunch of other shitty words and judgements at us. But they don’t get to decide the life we choose for ourselves. And Zak and I choose you. We want to have a family with you, we want to support you in your dreams and we want you to do the same for us. If you don’t want those same things, then you need to tell us—”

“Killian?” Noah interrupted.

I snapped my mouth shut because my name was one that Noah had a tendency to stumble over because it had several syllables.

“Yeah, baby?” I said when he didn’t say anything else. He smiled at the endearment.

“Can we go home now?” He leaned into Zak who kissed his forehead.

“That sounds like the best idea I’ve heard in a long fucking time,” I said.

Noah kissed Zak and then he was pushing into my arms. “I love you, Killian.”

“Love you, too, sweetheart,” I replied as I kissed him softly. I heard Zak and Liam exchanging the words as well.

I was about to lead Noah from the room when he suddenly dropped my hand and pushed past me toward the door. “Last one to the truck comes last!” he yelled. Liam darted past me, leaving me and Zak staring at one another in surprise.

Oh yeah, they were going to keep us on our toes for sure.

Zak kissed me and murmured, “I love you.”

“Love you,” I whispered.

“I really want to lose this bet, so can you make it look real when you chase me down there?” Zak asked.

I laughed and said, “You bet your ass I can.”

“That’s what I’m counting on, ass man.” Then he took off for the door.

I kept my word and used every cheat in the book as I raced him down the stairs and to the truck.

But I knew there would only be winners tonight.

And every night going forward.

EPILOGUE

NOAH

Two months later

“He’ll be fine,” Killian said for what had to be the hundredth time in the last hour. “He’s going to be *fine*.”

He looked at me pointedly and I quickly nodded, then added, “He will” because I was learning to use my words, even when they weren’t necessarily required.

Killian nodded and began pacing again. Zak and Liam and I were all sitting on the chairs in the waiting room, but Liam was fidgeting and Zak was rubbing his thumb over Liam’s hand the way he always did when he was comforting someone.

Though I suspected the move offered Zak just as much comfort.

“Should it be taking this long?” Killian asked Zak.

“Anesthesia affects everybody differently, even birds,” Zak reassured him. “They’ll want to make sure he’s fully awake before they give us an update.”

“Right,” Killian said.

He began pacing again. I went up and stepped in front of him. When Killian stopped, I put my arms around him. He let out a rough sigh, then hugged me back.

I was just as worried about Waldo as Killian and the others, but I knew what a fighter the toucan was. He was going to be fine and his new beak was going to be perfect for him.

Killian and I had worked long and hard researching the materials that would be the best kind to use for both the beak and the fixtures that would

attach the artificial one to the natural one, and we'd finally come to the conclusion that Killian's 3-D printer wouldn't be able to accommodate the material we'd wanted to use. We'd been able to find an engineer to review our design as well as a company willing to manufacture the beak, but it hadn't come cheap. Zak and Killian had been planning to dip into their savings to pay the costs, but Liam beat them to it. The lawyer Zak and Killian had hired had come through with getting Liam access to the inheritance his mother had left him, and he'd used a small chunk of it to pay the manufacturer. Killian and Zak had been angry because they'd wanted Liam to use the money for his education as well as mine, but Liam had shut down the argument pretty fast when he'd pointed out that we were family now and family took care of each other. It was no longer his money but our money, and Waldo was family, so *our* family had gotten *our* money.

That was pretty much how his argument had played out, and while I hadn't been able to follow along with some of what he and Killian had yelled back and forth at each other, watching them make up afterwards had been pretty straightforward.

Fights were few and far between among the four of us, but the stuff that came with making up happened on a daily basis.

Usually several times a day.

And in all sorts of interesting places.

Only having sex while we were all together was a thing of the past too. It was pretty much a free-for-all.

Though my favorite times were still when it was all four of us in our bed – yep, it wasn't just Zak and Killian's anymore, it was *ours*... that had been another “argument” that'd had a very memorable make-up moment – together at night just losing ourselves in one another. But of course, I wasn't about to complain when I walked in on two or all three of my guys fucking each other's brains out. And it sure was a lot of fun watching one of my men walk into a room and see me on all fours or on my back as I was being filled or as I was doing the filling.

Liam's tests had come back negative for the second time, so we'd been able to ditch the condoms. I hadn't been with Liam when he'd gotten the call with his results, but Zak had and from what I understood, they'd celebrated the moment by using the back seat of Zak's car and a deserted access road just outside of town. Unfortunately, our two errant lovers had ended up getting the car stuck in the snow and Killian had had to take his

truck to pull them out. But Zak and Liam had made efficient use of the time while they'd waited for Killian and by the time all three of them had gotten home, we'd had another celebration.

While things between the four of us were better than ever, we knew the outside world wasn't going to be as accepting. We didn't hide what we were to one another, but we didn't exactly advertise it either. Killian and Zak had gotten legally married so that when we were ready to start adding to our family, it would be one less obstacle to deal with. Surrogacy was definitely an option we would pursue, but all of us had agreed that we'd like to foster and adopt kids too. If the logistics proved to be too cumbersome and some people who didn't even know us said we weren't qualified to be some kid's family because there were four of us instead of two, then we'd find another way to help kids who needed it.

The day Killian and Zak had legally gotten married, we'd said our own private vows to one another. Killian's sponsor, Delia, had officiated our little private ceremony and a few people from Killian's, Zak's, and Liam's workplaces had attended. The four of us had exchanged rings that were all the same and had the words *Four Ever* inscribed in the inside of the band. Dr. Clark, Killian's and my psychologist, had been in attendance as well.

Both Killian and I continued to see Dr. Clark on a regular basis, though Killian's sessions were less often than mine. Dr. Clark was still helping me work through the guilt and loss I was feeling, especially after I'd gotten my father's first journal back, plus the new ones Gerald Darby had saved for me. I hadn't met Gerald yet, but I was hoping to soon, because he'd be able to tell me more about both my parents when I was ready. As for the journals, as I worked my way through them, I read one entry every night to Killian, Zak, and Liam before we went to sleep. Sometimes the entries made me laugh, sometimes not. I didn't always remember the events my father had written about, but some I did and once I got past my grief, I was able to share my memory of the time with my men.

Therapy was helping me to learn to communicate with others, even if I didn't necessarily feel as safe as my men made me feel. I'd been fortunate enough to land a job with the very vet whose clinic we were currently at. I'd been with Killian when we'd brought Waldo in for some pre-surgical testing, and the local vet had been impressed with the calming effect he said I had on Waldo. He'd asked me if I'd ever considered working with animals.

I hadn't up until that point.

Now it was all I could think about.

I hadn't started my new job yet but was scheduled to once Waldo was home and all healed up. I wouldn't be doing much more than cleaning cages to start, but I was incredibly excited.

And nervous.

The vet who was going to be my future employer had been kind enough to donate his operating room and resources for the procedure, even though he wasn't the doctor who was actually working on Waldo. No, it was the vet who'd done Waldo's beak the first time who'd agreed to come to our little town to do the second surgery. She'd even donated all her time, so the only thing we'd had to pay for was the beak itself.

I wasn't the only one set to start a new job soon. Killian had decided to return to being a cop, though he was going to work for our town rather than drive to Pittsburgh where there were police forces with SWAT positions like his old job in Philadelphia. Even though being a small-town cop came with fewer risks, we all knew the potential dangers Killian would still face. But it had been Zak who'd insisted that he return to the work he loved. And Killian was good at what he did, so even though I'd always worry about him when he was out working, the reality was that any one of us could not come home someday. It was a way of thinking that I refused to give in to. We were all here now, we were all together now. None of us took that for granted and we weren't wasting even a second of the gift we'd been given.

Liam was thriving at his job at the diner, but we knew he would eventually outgrow the place. Killian had already started looking into the different culinary institutes in Pittsburgh to see which ones were the best. Liam was protesting the idea because it would mean a long commute for him each day, but we all knew it was what he really wanted. His dream wasn't just to own a restaurant, but to be the driving force behind it. He'd always talked about working in the kitchen while I handled the business side. I hadn't had any issue sharing that dream with him when it'd been just the two of us and we'd had nothing. But being with Zak and Killian had shown us it was okay to dream bigger... to dream about the impossible.

Because there were plenty of people who would say four men in a committed, loving relationship wasn't possible.

We were proving them wrong every minute of every day.

And wasn't that just sad for them?

Killian relaxed in my hold. I had my head pressed against his chest so I could hear his heart beating loud and strong beneath my ear.

“Waldo’s family?” I heard someone call.

“That’s us,” Killian said as he took my hand and led me in the direction of the nurse who was standing at the door leading to the back, a chart in her hand. She looked up and opened her mouth to say something, then seemed to notice how all four of us were hanging on to each other in front of her. I didn’t recognize her as the same nurse who’d taken Waldo from us earlier in the day.

“All of you?” she asked.

“Yes,” Zak said. “How is he?” Zak had his arm around Liam and was holding on to Killian’s other hand.

“He’s fine,” the nurse said. She definitely seemed confused, but not necessarily disgusted. “He just woke up from the anesthesia and Dr. Sobel is happy with the results. She’ll be out to speak to you in a few minutes.”

“Can we see Waldo?” I asked.

The nurse smiled at me. “I’ll come get you as soon as I get him moved to a cage.”

“Thank you,” Killian said with a sigh of relief. He kissed me, then he was kissing Liam and Zak. We were all hugging and laughing when I noticed the nurse still watching us from the doorway. If it hadn’t been obvious that we were together, it sure as hell was now. But instead of shaking her head at us or casting us a disapproving look, she held my gaze a moment, then winked at me. Then she turned and returned to the back, letting the door slide shut behind her and leaving me and my men alone again.

Alone.

But together.

As it should be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed Four Ever.

As an independent author, I am always grateful for feedback so if you have the time and desire, please leave a review, good or bad, so I can continue to find out what my readers like and don't like. You can also send me feedback via email at sloane@sloanekennedy.com

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Locked in Silence
Sanctuary Found
The Truth Within
Absolution
Salvation
Retribution
Logan's Need
Redeeming Rafe
Saving Ren
Freeing Zane
Forsaken
Finding Home
Lost and Found
Safe and Sound

Body and Soul

Made Mine

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